Behind the Mask

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Behind the Mask

by TheCosmicPebble

Summary

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In 1850's Italy, the Monster of Florence is on the loose. He is terrorizing the city, attacking in the dead of night and leaving his victims mutilated beyond recognition.

In other news, William Graham has just been invited to a dinner party. He will soon learn what lies behind the mask of Doctor Hannibal Lecter, and he will also realize that Lecter may not be the only one hiding who he really is.

Notes

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Il Mercato

In the streets of Florence, Italy, there is a killer on the loose.

He is dressed in dark robes, his face concealed by a thick hood. The knife, which he holds in a death grip, is dripping with blood that mingles with the rain falling from the sky. It leaves a trail of red behind. The killer notices this; he does not care.
Sprinting in the dark, he nearly slips on the layer of water across the cobblestone road. He feels his heart drop, but he is able to catch himself before he falls. Like us, he is human. He is not immune to falling, nor is he immune to the fear of it. He just wants to go home.

He wouldn't dare be this reckless under normal circumstances. He had simply shot awake in the middle of the night, drenched in a cold sweat, a deep craving settled in his belly. He had to satisfy the need, and he had to do it that instant. So, dressed in his dark robes, carrying his knife and covered with his thick hood, he left the house and searched for a proper target.

The town would find the target the next morning, mutilated beyond belief.

The killer, the renowned Monster of Florence, finally reaches his home. He goes inside and quickly cleans himself off before diving back into his bed, shivering and afraid. He cannot go back to sleep.

Local Man Murdered on Piazza del Limbo

An unnamed victim was found in the alley of the Piazza del Limbo early this Thursday morning. The body was discovered at about ten to five o'clock by a local yard worker, who stumbled upon the scene on his typical route.
The yard worker instantly called Detective Jack Crawford, who lives nearby. Crawford arrived promptly and began to investigate the body. The victim is thought to be male, 30 to 35, murdered between two and four o'clock Thursday morning. He had been ferociously stabbed.

The body has been removed to the mortuary, under the care of Doctor Hannibal Lecter, and enquiries will be made.

-With reporting by Freddie Lounds

Will Graham, unsettled by the Friday morning news, set his paper down on the kitchen table. He buried his head in his hands, the humble plate of breakfast forgotten in front of him. Regret, acidic and vile, churned in his stomach.

He couldn't indulge in the tabloids anymore. He couldn't bear to hear about the Monster of Florence, terrorizing the town he had only recently come to. He hadn't come to Italy to be faced with so much drama, so things were not going the way he wished.

Having a killer on the run scared him, yes, but it was also an inconvenience. He had been trying desperately to get his name out there, to show everyone in the vicinity who he was and

how reputable his services were. A starving nurse from America was not likely to have opportunity knock, so he was relying on word of mouth; something, he realized, that wasn't very easy to do when all anyone could talk about was murder.

One of his dogs nestled its head into William's lap, distracting him. He smiled, leaving his chair to crouch on the ground and watching his pets scramble for attention. He considered giving them a piece of his breakfast, but stopped when he realized that this could potentially be his only meal today. The dogs could eat the leftovers, the foods that were too rotten for humans but perfect for animals.

His stomach growled as it was reminded of breakfast. He choked down what was on his plate, reminding himself that this food was necessary. His other meals were entirely dependent on circumstance, ones he couldn't always count on.

One last hug for each of the dogs, and he was on his way.

Out into the main plaza he went, watching all of the other vendors as they began to set up for the day. Fresh cheese and meats. Leather and cloth. Shoes and belts and hats. All of the wares were much more popular than his: fishing lures, crafted from the best materials he could find. It was the only job that was right for him. He hardly had enough food for himself, let alone others, and his sewing skills were nonexistent. He could only hope to get at least one sale per day, perhaps enough to buy a few lone pieces of bread.

"Mister Graham!"

William let out a sigh of relief. She was here. He smiled.

"Glad to see you as always, Abigail."

Abigail, a girl of about eighteen with eyes like the cloudless sky, smiled playfully at William as he approached. "The feeling's mutual. How can I help you today?"

She was standing behind her father's produce stand, the one she ran on particular days. Fresh tomatoes, peppers, apples, onions, the like. William's mouth was watering.

"You're the one who called me over," he teased. "I'm just here to make a living like everyone else."

"Make your living on a full stomach." Abigail reached down below her and took a bright apple from the shelf, winking at him as she handed it over. "No charge, as you know."

William reached over to rustle her hair, making her laugh and bat his hands away. "You're my guardian angel, Abigail," he said. "Always to the rescue."

"No one wants to buy from a skeleton. Now go enjoy. Wait a couple hours, and I might be able to sneak you another."

"You're a saint," William replied, smiling as he turned to leave.

"Shut up."

"A *saint*!"

William considered his job to be people-watching. No one ever stopped by his stand, so he spent the hours observing the bustling crowd and taking note on how the other vendors sold their wares. They all had relationships with their customers, witty and quick, meanwhile William was always on the outskirts. Being foreign would do that to a person, especially in such a tightly-knit community. Every once in a while, he would call out to advertise, but he gave up once he realized that no one was paying attention.

William began to get lost in himself as he always did. He would notice a figure in the crowd that slightly stood out from the rest, perhaps with a limp or a small skin irregularity, and he would think of all the medical potentialities for their conditions. He would imagine elaborate lives for all of them, crafting a world in his head where they were all plagued and miserable until they met him. He would help them out, and they would all learn to respect him...they would regret underestimating his medical talent.

That cough is definitively a symptom of consumption. Won't be long before the kerchief is spotted with blood.

What that man thinks is a sunburn is going to get worse. I can see the asymmetry— and no sunburn should be that color.

This guy's outfit is atrocious.

"Mister Graham?"

William's head jerked up as he snapped out of his daydreams. An unfamiliar man stood before him, dressed in a royal blue waistcoat— the same one William had thought to be atrocious. He really hoped he hadn't said that part out loud.

"I..yes." *Wonderful conversation.*

The man's face was too blank for William to figure out if he was offended. He didn't say anything else; he slid a white envelope onto the table before disappearing back into the crowd. No one paid him any mind.

William hesitantly picked the envelope up, turning it over in his hands. He examined the red wax seal, the intricate calligraphy on the front reading only his name. Finally, he broke the seal with care and took out a letter.

To whom it may concern,

It is with great pleasure that I invite you to my humble home for a fête masqué, free of charge. I shall be selecting a new trainee, and you are receiving this letter because I believe you to be a worthy contender. I do hope to be graced with your appearance.

There was further information in the letter, giving a specific time and details on dress code, but William wasn't interested in any of that. He was too busy staring down at the signature.

-Doctor Hannibal Lecter

He couldn't believe his eyes. He'd heard of Doctor Lecter— everyone had. He was possibly the richest man in Florence, being one of the head doctors as well as the only mortician. He was a very busy man, and his services reached far across the city. He was revered by everyone, and now William was being invited to his party? Out of all people, Doctor Lecter had chosen to invite *him*?

How did he even know of William's existence? Perhaps through Chilton, that bastard. William grit his teeth.

He couldn't go to this party. He wasn't worthy of it. He didn't even have a suit, let alone good shoes, or a mask...he couldn't do it. He would be a disgrace. He would embarrass himself.

"You seem lost."

William nearly jumped out of his skin at Abigail's voice. She was leaning across the counter on her elbows, watching him with interest. He looked up from the letter, his heart pounding, and he deflated once he truly realized the predicament he was in.

"I..I am," he replied. "I'm not sure.." He wordlessly handed her the letter, trading it for the fresh orange she had brought him. He pocketed the fruit for later.

Abigail's face lit up as she read the paper. "Mister Graham! You've struck gold!"

"It has to be a mistake—"

"He wrote your name on the envelope. He wants *you*! You have to go."

"I couldn't. I don't have the proper attire. I don't have a mask, I don't have a gift..am I supposed to bring a gift? I won't know a single person there."

"You want your word out, this is how you do it," she said, firmer this time. "You mingle!"

"I'm terrible at being sociable. I don't like it." William felt his stomach flutter with nerves. "I'll make a fool of myself, Abigail. For the love of God, he made a servant deliver the letter *for* him! This isn't my crowd."

"You can't pass this up. My father has many suits— I'll bring you one to borrow. Make your own mask. It would be a sin to let this opportunity go by." She lowered her brows, determined, and William didn't dare say aloud that he found it charming.

"You would help me? It's such a—"

"You're going." She set the letter back on the table, pointing to it. "He's searching for a trainee. That trainee could be you."

William hadn't even stopped to consider that possibility. It seemed too unlikely. There were many more honorable people coming to the party; there was no chance that he would be the one chosen. He took a moment now, though, to indulge in the thought: finally doing the job he loved to do, feeling comfortable, steady income, steady living, steady *food*...

"Alright," William relented. "Alright. I suppose I'll go."

La Danza

The mere sight of the villa's entryway was enough to make William stop in his tracks. He quickly gathered himself, making sure his mouth wasn't hanging open as he gazed in awe at the interior. He was surrounded by art, beautiful paintings that took up most of the walls and life-sized busts of Greek heroes. Two large, descending staircases came from the left and the right, both leading to one in the middle. There was plenty of warm light in the room, but it only made William feel more tense.

He shouldn't be here. He *definitely* shouldn't be here.

What had he been thinking? He was nowhere near cut out for this lifestyle, and it was foolish of him to even consider the idea. The doctor would never notice him, especially considering his status. He was among the lowest of the low, living as quietly as he could, and prestige had flown over his head. Normally he liked it that way, but his invisibility wouldn't be useful tonight.

Despite these thoughts rushing through his head, his body moved of its own volition, and he found himself walking up the stairs. His suit, which he could thank Abigail's father for, was slightly too big, and it rustled uncomfortably as he walked.

The doorway led to an even larger, more beautiful room, if that was possible. He was immediately surrounded by the unmistakable spirit of people, laughing and drinking and dancing. Seeing them all in their masks sent a chill down his arms, and he cursed himself for not being brave enough to wear one. He'd tried to make one, but it ended up looking hideous and suffocating him with its weight, so he decided against it. Now that seemed like a bad idea.

The soft sound of a harpsichord rang through the room, somehow audible over the chatter. It was a beautiful melody, one that commanded the listeners to dance. William wasn't itching for a partner, however; he wanted to attempt to talk to Doctor Lecter and leave as soon as possible.

The party was meant to be fun, but there was competition in the air. It also served as a recruiting function; after all, the most sought-out doctor in the country of Italy was looking for an apprentice. William was astounded by the idea that they were sharing a room right now, that such a prestigious man was moments away from him.

Of course, though, the doctor had his quirks. He wanted to put personality and skill before looks, thus the idea of the masquerade ball. Slightly out of date, but charming.

William traversed his way through the party, trying to get closer to the middle of the room. No one spared him a glance, which wasn't surprising. The harpsichord got louder as he walked, but it was soon drowned out by polite clapping as the music came to an end. William peeked over the heads of the crowd, spotting the man at the harpsichord. He spoke with a few people around him, tilting his head back in a laugh.

It was no question that this was Dr. Lecter. His mask was only covering the eyes, adorned with silver and gold. Other than that, he had an undeniable air of authority. His suit was simply nicer, his posture more straight. There was clear reverence in the eyes of those who were speaking to him.

William took off, trying to get as close as possible to be noticed. As he approached, however, he was halted by someone forcefully nudging into him. He spun around, facing a man with dark hair and a disgusted look on his face. He had his mask pushed up, nursing a glass of wine. Beside him was a blonde woman with a red, sparkly mask.

"Forgive me," Will blurted before a fight could start. "It's very dark in here."

The man sized him up. "I know everyone here, and I can confidently say I've never seen you before."

"I haven't been in the country for long. William Graham." He stuck his hand out, and after a long hesitation the man shook it.

"Frederick Chilton. Colleague of Lecter's. And my wife," he nodded to the woman, who didn't say a word, "Bedelia. You're from America, I assume?"

"Yes. Louisiana."

"I see." Chilton raised an eyebrow. "And you're aware of tonight's recruitment?"

"I am, yes."

The three stood in silence for a moment, lightning dancing between their gazes. Chilton looked like he wanted to spit on William.

"I would wish you the best of luck, but I'm not sure it's on your side," he said. "You don't check the right boxes for Lecter— I should know. Such a young man from..Louisiana..I'm not so sure. You should stay for the food, though— he's a lovely chef."

"I don't—"

"I've heard the same." A sudden voice came from behind the couple, causing everyone to jump. Chilton whipped around, his face softening as soon as he saw who was behind him. Bedelia's shoulders fell.

"I think I know more about my own 'boxes' than you do, Chilton," the man continued. His voice was lightly accented. Pleasant. Soothing. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Doctor Lecter!" William could almost see the sweat appearing on Chilton's forehead. "What a pleasant surprise. How are you this evening?"

"Just wonderful, Doctor." Lecter's unreadable gaze was fixed on William. William stared back, at a loss for words. "Who might your friend be?"

William swallowed hard and broke himself out of his stupor. "William. William Graham," he blurted, holding out his hand. "It's an honor."

The two shook. "Of course. I'm afraid I didn't catch where you're from?"

"Louisiana, sir. In America."

"Come a long way, haven't you?" Lecter's eyes were hidden behind the mask; it was hard to tell what he was thinking. "Frederick, Bedelia, I hope you'll excuse us. I've never met Mr. Graham before. I'd like to have the chance to talk."

Chilton spouted out some nervous praises, stumbling over his words, but William heard none of it. His ears felt like they were stuffed with cotton. As the couple walked away, William could see Bedelia angrily whispering to her husband, shoving his shoulder. Soon, he was alone with the doctor, and he nervously waited for him to speak. He'd been waiting for this moment, and now he was stuck.

"It gets rather stuffy in here. I don't think I had the right idea." Lecter chuckled, reaching for his mask and beginning to pull it upward. Will blinked in surprise— was this a good sign? Bad sign? Was he smart for not wearing a mask, or did he look like a fool? He always looked like a fool, who was he kidding—

Oh. Oh, my goodness.

William had never met Doctor Lecter in person. He had seen pictures, but they weren't recent, and they didn't even begin to do this man justice. He was perfect. His face and cheeks were sharp, defined, and he had neat hair and maroon eyes that made William want to melt. His stomach fluttered, and as the doctor got a clear sight of William he noticed the same amazement in his gaze. There was a millisecond of captivation, both of them frozen by the other's looks.

Lecter was the first to regain composure. "I'm sure you're aware that I'm a very unorthodox man, Mr. Graham," he said. "Even in my personal life. After seeing your expression just now, I can't help but feel that you're the same." He raised an eyebrow. "Am I correct?"

William understood what he was insinuating, and it was surprising to hear. Doctor Lecter had always remained unmarried, but William assumed it was because of his private nature. Now..now he was implying something completely different. Something that made William's stomach twist even more. "You can call me William, Dr. Lecter. And, um..yes. I am. Unorthodox, I mean," he stammered.

You're beautiful. Oh, you're so pretty.

"Good to know. And you may call me Hannibal." He offered a hand. "Please, I insist you dance with me."

William had been so engrossed in the conversation that he hadn't noticed the music pick back up. His face flushed, and he took Hannibal's hand without a word.

The playing wasn't as expertly done, but it was enough. He tensed at Hannibal's touch, not used to contact. Hannibal seemed unfazed, though, and he began to lead them in a dance.

The two of them moved fluidly, with Hannibal easily leading William along. If people weren't looking at him before, they sure were now; he heard plenty of whispers as they waltzed across the room. He didn't care one bit— in that moment, time was frozen. It was him and Hannibal only, strong hands holding onto him and making him shiver in delight. They twirled, Hannibal's palms resting on William's waist.

It wasn't long enough. As they came to a stop, Hannibal led them wordlessly out one of the golden doors onto a large balcony. Flowers adorned the railing and candles were lit on stands. The night was quiet and cloudy, the moon only peeking out every once in a while.

"Look at you, my dear dancer," Hannibal said, smirking.

William laughed breathlessly. He was exhilarated. "I haven't danced in years. I guess you never really forget how."

"I'm honored to help you pick it back up." He leaned in, wrapping his arms around William's waist and pulling him close. His face fell slightly. "Goodness, William, you're thin as a rail," he remarked, true concern in his voice. "Do you get enough food at home?"

"Honestly? No." William kept his face blank. "But please don't pity me for it. I despise pity."

Hannibal nodded, seemingly impressed, and dropped the topic. "You're something special. What brings you here?"

"The invitation?"

Hannibal laughed. It was a musical baritone, captivating. "The invitation you accepted. Why?"

William paused. "I had to try. I think..I deserve more for myself. Something better."

Hannibal quirked an eyebrow. "Of course. You do deserve something better— at least, something better than Chilton." He snickered, taking William by surprise.

"Don't let that little fluke influence your decision," William said.

"Oh, William," Hannibal smirked, "you've already influenced me."

Before William could respond, the two were interrupted by someone peeking out onto the balcony. It was the man who had given William the letter, still in that horrid waistcoat. "Doctor Lecter?" He asked shyly. "You're needed in the kitchen."

Hannibal nodded and, once the man was gone, pressed his forehead against William's.

"I apologize for cutting this short," he said softly. "I hope you'll be staying for dinner?"

"Of course," William replied without hesitation. "I wouldn't miss it."

"Great." Hannibal took his hand and brought it up to his lips, kissing the knuckles. "This isn't over," he said, winking at him before disappearing back inside.

William stood on the balcony, stunned by the interaction. He felt himself blushing, and he rubbed the spot where Hannibal's lips had touched his hand. He smiled to himself before finally reentering the ballroom.

Il Pasto

It became clear to William rather quickly who the rulers of the party were. Chilton and Bedelia were frequently engaged in conversations, the crowd laughing heartily at everything they had to say. They seemed to know everyone around.

They were popular, for sure, but they were nothing compared to Hannibal Lecter. The man would pop in and out of the room at completely random intervals, seemingly very busy, but everyone always had something to say to him. He would always respond, and whoever he'd spoken to would walk away a little brighter.

William's eyes were consistently drawn to that gross shade of blue, that man in the waistcoat who dragged Hannibal around like a dog on a leash. Hannibal seemed exasperated at the mere sight of him, and at one point William noticed them caught up in a silent argument. They were whispering to each other with furrowed brows, and Hannibal had a fire in his gaze that made William cower even from a distance.

He forgot about it the moment that Hannibal passed by him, resting his fingers on the small of William's back for a prolonged moment before walking away. It nearly sent William into a stupor.

He had been walking past William on his way to a group of three, two women and a man. The man, slim with cropped hair and glasses, was wearing a fur coat that reached the ground. He had one woman on his arm and another at a great distance.

William knew who they were, of course. The Vergers: Mason, his wife Alana, and his sister Margot. Only the most prestigious businessman in Florence, Mason's pork products had made him richer than sin. He and his wife had taken in his sister, a few years younger than him in age, after she'd been weakened by an illness a few years ago. Judging by the way she was looking at him, they didn't get along well. Never do business with family, everyone said, and the Vergers were the epitome of that.

Mason spoke to Hannibal briefly, a flashy smile on his face. Alana lowered her head, smiling softly under the curtain of her dark hair, and Margot simply stared at the two men as they interacted. There was something in her face that was sharp, intimidating. She was sharp everywhere, in fact. Pointed. Will moved closer.

"Now, you know I'm not a doctor, unless you count a pig surgeon." Mason guffawed. "I know if I was, though, I'd have this position thrown at my feet."

Hannibal's smile was clearly forced. "Where would we be if you didn't stick to the pork business? Without our prosciutto? Blasphemy."

"Remind me to slaughter you a hog, my friend." Mason clapped Hannibal's shoulder. "A gift."

"You know I'll take you up on that." Hannibal swiveled around as that same man tugged on his sleeve, and with a large sigh he moved to follow. "Excuse me," he said, and Mason waved him off.

William considered going up to introduce himself, but that thought was broken by the sound of a large bell ringing throughout the room. He jolted, and the room quickly quieted down.

"I ask that everyone please find their seats," Hannibal called out to the room. His voice was commanding and smooth, and everyone obeyed. "Dinner will be out in just a moment."

The room had been decked with round tables covered in white lace tablecloths. There were small cards at each seat with a name written in calligraphy, with about six to each table. William walked quickly around the room, trying to find his, and he was startled by a sudden hand on his shoulder.

"I moved you," Hannibal said in a low voice. "I'll be damned if you spend more time with Chilton than with me." He winked.

"If I'm not mistaken, I'd say you were falling for me, Hannibal," William replied.

Hannibal merely stared at him for a moment, his eyes sparkling, and the corner of his mouth eventually quirked up. He didn't answer in words; he let his hand travel down William's arm and entwined their fingers together. He gave William's hand a light squeeze before letting go, smiling softly as he turned to lead them to their table.

William was *smitten*. He would follow that man anywhere.

They sat together at the table and bantered with the others, but William was focused heavily on Hannibal. All of the other voices were drowned out in favor of his, the rest of the world blurred while he was in sharp focus. There was something so magnetizing about him, like he knew exactly how to draw attention to himself and win everyone's praise. He was a master of charm.

When the food came, William couldn't help the way his mouth watered. It all smelled so delicious. There was so much of it, too— appetizers and salad and entrées and palate cleansers..much different from the few lone bites he was used to. He didn't want to appear gluttonous, but all of that worry melted away when the first bite entered his mouth.

Each bite was a new experience. He was exposed to flavors he'd never tried before: salty, almost fruity prosciutto, thinly sliced with ripe tomatoes on crunchy bread. Herbs dancing on his tongue, fresh and aged cheeses, savory meat with sweet sauces and squeezes of fresh lemon. He kept a moderate pace, as he had to take the time to savor every bite. He pretended to listen to the other guests' conversations, when in reality he was lost in this new world of food. It felt so good to nourish his body. So, so good. He nearly wanted to sink to his knees and thank Hannibal.

When he finally found himself stuffed, a completely unfamiliar feeling, Hannibal placed his hand on his thigh under the tablecloth. William felt his warm palm through the fabric of

his pants, and he relished in the feeling. What a perfect night this was.

Hannibal began to massage William's thigh, and William had to stop himself from turning bright red. He placed his hand on top of Hannibal's, feeling his skin...

Hannibal stood. The tables around them all turned to look, drawn to him. He picked up his fork and tapped it against his glass of wine, silencing the room.

"Thank you all for being here," he said with a smile. "I hope you all are enjoying the food."

The room erupted with clapping. Hannibal brightened and waited patiently for it to die down.

"Good to know." Polite laughter from the guests. "As some of you may already be aware, I am on the lookout for a new trainee. Someone who can take the place of my previous assistant, who followed his heart to the United Kingdom. I'm sad to see him go, but I'm grateful for a new opportunity as well."

He paused. "Normally, a search like this would take a few days to process, but..I'm pleased to say a decision has already been made."

The room was on edge. The silence was deafening. William felt dread settling in his stomach as he realized what was about to happen. He didn't want things to go like this— he wanted to get the position for his talent, not for pity or lust.

"I'd like to introduce William Graham."

William held back his disappointed expression as he took Hannibal's hand. He stood along with him, blinking in surprise when he realized how full his stomach actually was. It nearly sent him off balance.

"My new assistant, William Graham." Hannibal smiled. "Please give him a warm congratulations."

The guests began to applaud. William glanced around the room and caught some expressions of surprise, confusion, even disgust from people like Chilton. No one knew who he was. No one cared about a nurse who was so starving that he gorged himself at anyone else's home.

He didn't deserve this. He didn't want it. He didn't know what to think.

Hannibal squeezed his hand again. "We will talk," he whispered above the noise. "But I greatly hope you'll accept."

"Hannibal, I can't—"

"We will talk," he repeated, "once this is over."

William could do nothing but nod.

Soon after, the party began to disperse. It was as if all of the guests lost interest the moment Doctor Lecter couldn't give them what they wanted. They were all there for the potential position, and now that slot was taken by some peasant. Someone completely out of place.

William sheepishly accepted some congratulations from people, which were few and far between. The rest of the guests passed by him without even a glance. As the minutes passed, William found himself growing more and more tired, his eyes beginning to droop and his full stomach taking its toll on him. He knew everyone was dreading the party's clean-up.

Once the last guest had finally left the room, and the main doors were closed, William watched as Hannibal sagged in on himself. When he turned around, he looked exhausted, and the sight of his many housekeepers waiting for his order seemed to make him even more so. Surprisingly, the man with the blue coat was missing from the group— something that William didn't pay much mind to, as his presence was nothing but a nuisance to Hannibal.

"What time is it?" Hannibal asked.

"Approaching midnight, Doctor," one of the men answered immediately.

"Oh, I can't bear the thought of it. Go home. All of you." He smiled softly. "Except for William, that is— I have to talk to him. I will take care of the cleaning tomorrow. You all must rest, I demand it. I'll pay you first thing on Monday."

The group stood there for a moment, bewildered, and once they noticed that Hannibal was serious they all erupted in praise. They bowed their heads to him, thanking him and shaking his hand as they walked out of the villa. They were giddy, like they couldn't believe this was really happening.

The doors loudly closed behind them, and William was left alone with Hannibal. It was the first time they'd been together in true silence, true isolation.

"You're in a very good mood," Will remarked.

"Indeed." Hannibal smiled at him. "It's been a rather lovely night." He moved closer, taking William's hand. "So, so lovely."

"I agree."

"I promise, I'll speak to you about the job soon, but I think we should wait until we're both more present. How far is your home from here?"

"Oh, not bad. Five minutes at most." That was something that had surprised William— that two people from completely different worlds could also be so close. All he had to do was turn a street corner, and there was the villa. It came with being so close to the market, he supposed. "I'll be just fine walking."

Quite frankly, he was glad that Hannibal wasn't pushing for more. He was too tired to continue to be a person— he just wanted to lay down and not have to impress anyone.

"I want you to come for dinner tomorrow. Just the two of us." Hannibal's eyes were full of hope. "Please?"

"I wouldn't miss that for the world, Hannibal." William broke into a grin, one that Hannibal wholeheartedly returned. There was a moment where they stared into each other's eyes, the smiles slowly slipping from their faces, and before either of them knew it they were leaning towards each other, pressing their lips together. William felt his heart leap to his throat, and Hannibal squeezed his hand. The exchange was brief, but they were both pleasantly shocked.

"Tomorrow," Hannibal repeated. "Seven. I promise it won't be a mess in here."

"It could be a pigsty in here and I would still be all over you." The words came out before William could stop them— he was feeling brave tonight. He was finally full and warm, finally hopeful for what was to come.

Hannibal gave him another brief kiss before opening the door for him. "Please be safe, dear."

"Thank you." William's stomach fluttered. "I will."

Il Letto

William didn't have another suit to wear.

He wasn't even sure what he was supposed to be wearing. His working clothes? A tuxedo? He settled for wearing the white button-down without the jacket, as well as the black pants from the night before. There weren't any visible stains— people had multiple pairs of black pants, right? It wouldn't be too obvious?

He couldn't stop thinking about Hannibal. His outfit meant nothing to him in the long run — it was Hannibal that mattered.

And so off he went, knocking on the door of this massive villa.

Like Hannibal had promised, it was just the two of them, no servants in sight. Hannibal had fixed another delicious dinner, which William had subtlety devoured in an attempt to not look too gluttonous. It was all so wonderful— the food, the comfort, Hannibal's warm crimson eyes drinking him in like he was a prized piece of art. He was happy here. He felt safe from who he truly was.

Once they were finished with the meal, Hannibal had refilled their glasses of wine and led them into the sitting room. He'd effortlessly started a fire, bright and blooming, and the two of them sat in front of it in high-backed leather chairs. Above the fireplace was the head of a stag, its antlers casting shadows about the orange room.

The mansion was much more imposing when the two of them were alone. There was no laughter, no chatter, just the silent emotional charge between them and the crackling of the fireplace. William's brow was furrowed, deep in thought, and the two hadn't spoken for a long while. The silence wasn't uncomfortable, but it was heavy. It hung over the two of them and weighed their shoulders down.

"You seem lost in thought," Hannibal remarked.

"Hannibal, I think..we need to talk about this job. I don't think you've made the right choice."

"Of course I have." He sounded bewildered, like he couldn't fathom the idea of being wrong.

"You don't know me. You don't know my credentials. My past. My present." William had to keep thinking of ways to dodge the truth, to not reveal too much at once. "You hired me because you had eyes for me. And I don't..I don't wish to be hired for that reason. I want to be hired because I'm worthy."

After a long pause, Hannibal sighed. When William looked over at him, his eyes were closed.

"You're correct in that I do have eyes for you," he admitted. "It would be a lie to say I did not. But that is not the reason I've given you this position."

"Then what is the reason?"

"I can see it in your demeanor." Hannibal glanced over at him. "I can see that..well, you're not too fond of people, William."

It was true, but William still jolted at the acknowledgment. He didn't like to be called out for it, especially since he put so much effort into his social reputation. "I try to hide it, but..no. I'm not fond of them. Not particularly."

"Neither am I."

William blinked, startled.

"In fact, I can't quite stand them." Hannibal sipped his wine. "And being a surgeon, being a mortician, is rather easy if you don't care for people. You don't mind if they're suffering. You don't break down when they're dead." He shrugged. "Perhaps that makes me a sociopath. Perhaps it makes me a good doctor. Based on the way my party went last night, people seem to think I'm the latter."

"And they see me as the former?"

"I didn't say that. But..if you continue to live in isolation, I suppose they could."

"You're giving me the job to save my reputation?"

"I can't control what people think, William, and neither can you. But I figured it would be beneficial in many ways to work with someone so similar to me. Someone who can keep their composure, someone who has been looking for this opportunity ever since he got here." He raised an eyebrow. "Do you intend to refuse after I've finally offered it to you?"

William took a deep breath. Each time he sipped his wine, he felt a warm feeling bloom inside his stomach. He wasn't used to drinking. "No," he finally replied. "I don't intend to."

"Wonderful." Hannibal smiled. It was the knowing smile of a man who always gets what he wants. "I was hoping you'd be willing to work with me. Anything to be around you."

William laughed, exasperated. "You really like me, don't you?"

"Is that so wrong?"

"It's not common. Not in my life."

Hannibal set his glass of wine down on the side table and leaned forward in his chair, so close to the edge that he nearly hung off of it. William's eyes were drawn to his strong hands, the way his thumbs twiddled and his calloused knuckles gleamed in the firelight.

"William." Those hands were moving now, up and up and up until his palms were resting on Will's cheeks. He gently held William's face. "Oh, William."

He spoke the name sensually. It vibrated low in his throat and send chills through William's body.

Hannibal licked his lips before glancing down at William's. He slowly shook his head.

"I can't take this anymore," he whispered, and then he was leaning in and pressing their mouths together.

William felt his whole body hum with warmth. It felt wonderful to finally have these feelings confirmed, to stop dancing around the questions. Men like them had to be careful—slip up once around the wrong person and they would find themselves exiled, killed. In this moment, William wondered: would the world still react the same if they could see this? This soft, tender kiss by the fire? The way Hannibal had looked at him, said his name? Would they see that their lives were just as natural as anyone else's?

William felt his eyelids begin to droop. He was worn out, but he would be damned if he let this get the best of him. He wanted Hannibal to consume him, to swallow up the rest of the world until it was just the two of them.

Hannibal broke from the kiss, and his bottom lip was quivering with some unreadable emotion. He began to pull William towards one of the villa's many dark hallways, and together they entered a bedroom that was bigger than Will's entire house. It was dark, save for an oil lamp in the corner that only lit about half of the room.

He hardly had time to take in his surroundings before he was being kissed again. He slung his arms around Hannibal's neck and pulled him close, feeling their bodies press together. William sighed with pleasure as he felt someone else's warmth against him.

"You captivate me." Hannibal kissed his neck. "A siren, that's what you are. Drawing me in like this.."

"I couldn't stop thinking about you last night," Will admitted to him. "I fell asleep thinking about you. The way you touched me."

Hannibal's hand snaked down Will's torso to his thigh, squeezing it. "Like this?"

"God, yes." He kissed Hannibal on the mouth again, his vision blurry with exhaustion and excitement and ecstasy. "I still felt the shadow of your touch as I went to bed."

"Did it make you feel good?" Hannibal muttered in his ear. He began to play with the buttons of Will's shirt, slowly unfastening them. "Did you enjoy yourself, William?"

"I.." William focused on his fingers brushing against his chest. The clothes were coming off.

"You do not need to be ashamed." Halfway there now. Hannibal drew small circles on William's chest with his finger. "Tell me what you did. Did you touch yourself?"

"I did," William whispered. Hearing those words out of Hannibal's mouth was enough to make him instantly hard. "I did. I felt your hand on my thigh, and I touched myself."

Hannibal slid William's shirt off by the sleeves and let it hit the floor. He quickly moved to take off his own, and William was disappointed when he couldn't clearly see what was underneath. He would have to feel it instead.

"More," Hannibal asked, and he had to obey. As he spoke, Hannibal's hands unfastened William's pants and pulled them off of his legs.

"I was in bed, and I thought about the way you danced with me," he continued. "I liked the way your body felt. I imagined it on top of mine. Your hands working up and down.." He sucked in a sharp breath. Hannibal had pulled down William's underwear, exposing him, and now he had a hand around William's cock. Slowly, agonizingly, he began to stroke.

"Oh..Hannibal." He sucked his bottom lip between his teeth, throbbing. Waves of pleasure rocked him.

"Does it feel nice to get what you wanted?"

"Yes." William moaned. He was sweating now. It was everything he'd imagined and more.

"Good." Hannibal's fingers unfurled, leaving Will desperate for more. "Get on the bed."

William moved as if the Devil himself was after him, scrambling onto the bed. He heard rustling as Hannibal removed his pants and underwear, and then the mattress sank with the weight of his body.

"Spread your legs," he said, and William did. Hannibal positioned himself in the middle, lowering his head and opening his mouth--

William saw stars. Hannibal's tongue danced around his cock, licking the tip, and his lips became slick with saliva. He swallowed around William, cheeks hollowing. William cried out.

"Yes. Yes. Please. More."

Hannibal glanced up at him, and the look in his dark eyes was hypnotizing. William was lost in his gaze for a brief moment, so lost that he didn't notice Hannibal's hand moving towards him. He brought two fingers to the perineum and began to massage. William gripped the sheets with white knuckles and threw his head back. He was dizzy for it.

There was a familiar pressure building up inside of him. As Hannibal pressed even deeper, his fingers moving with even more enthusiasm, William felt the man's tongue dart around as he lapped up the precum escaping from him.

"I'm coming, Hannibal," he warned, but Hannibal made no move to get away. The blood buzzed in his ears as the heat went to his head.

Eventually, when he was right on the brink, Hannibal stopped. He pulled his hand back, lifted his head, and stared at William with a dark smile in his eyes. William was nearly in pain.

"Please," he begged, "I can't wait anymore."

Hannibal placed a hand on William's knee and closed his legs slightly, allowing him to straddle William. He pressed their hips together— he was hard, too— and began to rock. William felt the friction between their skin, heating them up.

"I..I have to.." Will was rocking as well, but in discomfort. He had to get this out. The room was spinning.

"You must be patient." He ran his tongue along William's collarbone, his fingers playing with his tender nipple. Will moaned, his back arching.

"I can't. I can't!"

"Good things come to those who wait. How do you want this to end, my dear?"

"In your mouth again."

Hannibal complied, and in mere moments William was overcome with so much pleasure that he nearly blacked out. He finally felt the white hot pressure subside, his entire body flooding with relief, and there was one last burst of heat as Hannibal swallowed what he'd given him. His throat bobbed, and William watched it closely.

William heard ringing in his ears, his whole body pulsing and hot, and he barely registered the feeling of Hannibal taking his mouth away. He was too focused on orienting himself; he was nauseated with how tired and overworked he was.

Hannibal was kissing his forehead, but he didn't feel it. It was like he had left his body and was watching everything from afar.

"I don't..not right. Don't feel good," he slurred, his vision fading in and out.

"You're sick?" Concern in his voice.

"Hot. Dizzy."

"Oh, it's alright," Hannibal cooed, kissing him again. "You're excited. Stay here, please— I'll take care of you, William."

William closed his eyes to try to push the sickness away, but before he could fight it he was drifting into unconsciousness. Hannibal noticed.

"You can sleep, dear. I'll take care of you. I'll take care of you..."

He sank into the darkness as Hannibal caressed his face one last time, kissing him on the lips.

He awoke later in the middle of the night, drenched in sweat.

He was still in the unfamiliar bed, but Hannibal was gone.

La Droga

William waited for a few minutes, laying in the dark and waiting for Hannibal to return. With every second that he didn't, William found himself growing more and more nervous— where had he gone? This couldn't be a run to the restroom. He wasn't hearing any noises from the sitting room, nor the kitchen. Had Hannibal been ashamed of what they'd done? Had there been an emergency that required a doctor?

Reluctantly, William slipped out from under the covers and picked up his shirt. He didn't bother to button it. He threw on his underwear and pants and began to explore.

He felt much better than before, but there was still some residual nausea. He hoped that he hadn't caught anything from the party— that would be humiliating. He was already embarrassed enough from a few hours ago. He'd acted like an animal. They both had.

But it was wonderful. He couldn't deny that.

"Hannibal?" He cautiously called out, not getting a response. His footsteps were silent in the large mansion, and the thought of exploring all of these rooms was exhausting. He considered waiting until daybreak.

Then he heard a loud pop, the wood in the house settling. It made him jump out of his skin.

It had come from somewhere in the hallway he'd been in. He turned back and peeked in through the doors as he went, finding nothing. Some of them let out loud creaks that made him wince, even though he knew the only two people in the house were awake.

"Hannibal?" It echoed uncomfortably.

A few doors down from the bedroom, he caught the dancing glare of a lantern resting near the top of the stairs. Yes. This was where he needed to be. He picked it up.

He descended down the dark stairwell, the stairs creaking. The lantern didn't do much for him, and he was blind down here. He wanted to turn around and run towards the solace of the fireplace, but something kept calling him back. He worried that Hannibal was in trouble.

"Hannibal."

He heard a muffled grunt coming from somewhere below him, and he began to run down the stairs. Filled with adrenaline, he swung the lantern left and right to try and see where there was any place the noise could have come from.

"Hello?"

Another grunt. He went left.

Whoever was calling out didn't need William's cues anymore— they kept letting out muffled cries as William approached. William inched forward slowly, the hallway giving way to nothing. He was going to be lost forever.

His foot landed on something soft, something unlike the cold hardwood. He bent down.

It was a scrap of cloth. He would know that horrific shade of blue anywhere now.

He stumbled backwards, wondering what course of action to take. Did this man have Hannibal in his clutches? He was certainly angry and possessive the previous night. William would be a fool to simply turn and run after all of this, right? He'd already made his presence known. He wanted Hannibal.

He rounded a corner, and the thin hallway opened into a tiny, freezing concrete room. Someone was slumped in the corner, knees pulled up to their chest.

William raised the lantern and came face to face with the man in the blue coat. The one who had given him his invitation, who'd pulled Hannibal all over the place at the party. His face was pallid, his mouth stuffed with a gag, and his hands were chained to the wall with cuffs. At the sight of William, he thrashed, kicking and screaming behind the gag.

William, unfazed, was at the man's side in an instant. He yanked the gag out of the man's mouth, and he began to cough uncontrollably. It was loud and racking, and William winced at the thought that this would clearly draw the perpetrator to them.

"Where's Hannibal?" He asked, gripping the man by his shoulders. He couldn't care less about this person; he wanted Hannibal. He wanted to know what was going on.

The man wrenched away from him, disturbing the chains around his wrist. Why was this room even here? What was the reasoning behind—

The man cursed in Italian.

Something suddenly barreled William in the chest, and he was being yanked backwards. His attacker wrapped a strong arm around his neck, and he pressed a cold rag to William's face. William kicked out, but the moment he heard the attacker's voice his whole body slackened in shock.

"William.." Hannibal muttered, tilting his head to breathe in William's scent. "Oh, William.."

It was the same intonation he had used before, that same sensual drag in his voice. That same rumble in his throat that had aroused William before, but now disgusted him.

"This is unfortunate, William."

William tried to speak against the cloth, but Hannibal had a firm grip on him. He moved a few steps forward, shoving William along the way, and he slowly lowered both of them down to face the man on the floor.

"Pick it up," he told William, stern but not unkind. William obeyed, feeling the damp fabric.

"Now put it in his mouth. Push it in there nice and tight, please. You have to go between his teeth."

William slowly brought the gag to the man's mouth. He kept his lips tight shut at first, but under Hannibal's glare he slowly resolved to open them. William rolled the cloth into a tight knot like it had been earlier, and he worked it in between the man's teeth. The man looked up at him with eyes like fire, hating him for going along with this.

And then, without warning, he bit down, catching William's fingers in his jaws. Pain shot up the tips of his fingers. William cried out, yanking his hand away, and Hannibal narrowed his eyes.

"Did he bite you?" He asked, poison in his voice. William nodded, the cloth scratching against his face. He expected Hannibal to snap at him, scold him for acting so stupid, but instead he did something that sent a chill through William's entire body: he smiled. It was small, but it was there.

"Franklyn." He leaned forward until his face was inches from the man's. "I appreciate you sharing part of your past with me. I never would have known you were raised in the Verger barn, surrounded by all those *pigs*." He spat the words out like they were rotten.

To William's shock, Hannibal let go of him, his attention turned to Franklyn instead. He knew better than to lash out, though— Hannibal would always catch him. He knew that for sure.

Hannibal moved behind Franklyn and firmly placed his hands on both sides of his head. Franklyn began to scream against the gag, his face turning red, but it was too late. William watched in horror as Hannibal reared back, readied himself, and twisted Franklyn's head with a sickening crack. Franklyn went limp on the floor, never to rebel again.

"There we go," he said, satisfied. "I'm truly sorry about that, William. Disgusting."

William, too stunned to speak, simply knelt there on the ground. Hannibal stared at him, and William was struck with the fact that the fire in his eyes was stronger than it had been before. This wasn't a feisty romance— this was pure, unadulterated obsession. He kept his composure, that cool smile staying on his face, but William could see it in the eyes. His gaze was manic.

Why did he want William, of all people?

"Come with me." Hannibal took both of William's wrists and pinned them together with surprising strength. "Struggle, and it will only get worse, my dear."

He let Hannibal lead them into the hallway, down the corridor, all the way up the stairs and into the living room. It was a slow walk, excruciatingly slow. He didn't object when

Hannibal sat him down in the chair by the fireplace. Their half-filled wine glasses were still sitting on the end table, discarded the moment the two brought their lips together...

Drinking wine together, feeling exhausted...I don't feel right. Why do I feel like this? Don't feel right.

You're sick? You're just excited. Sleep here...I'll take care of you. I'll take care of you.

Hannibal knelt on the ground in front of William, making sure he couldn't get up and run.

"What a night we've had." He examined the insides of William's arms, lightly prodding at them.

William looked him in the eyes. "It's going to end with you killing me, isn't it?"

"Rather rash assumption to make. You have good veins," he remarked. William struggled to find an answer, and by the time he saw the flash of the needle in the firelight it was too late. Hannibal had literally hidden it up his sleeve, distracting William while he pulled it out. He plunged it into the crook of William's elbow, and William felt a cold liquid seeping into his blood.

"What did you just do?" He asked, panicked. How could he have been so stupid to not notice?

"Just helping you relax a little. I can't have you running away on me, now, can I?" His voice was so calming, smooth like silk. He gently massaged William's elbow, letting the medicine seep in.

"You..put something. In my wine," William said. Hannibal gave a proud smile.

"I did. Smart of you to notice." He had his hand on William's thigh again. He couldn't deny that it felt good. "I did last night too, in fact. Just enough to make you a little bit tired. Enough to make you want to go home. I couldn't have you in the house when I took poor Franklyn in, could I?"

William thought back to the party, feeling weary and ready to return to his bed. Hannibal telling him to be safe. Whatever Hannibal had given him was starting to take effect, now; his muscles felt so, so heavy. He wasn't going to be able to get up from this chair, let alone run away.

"And tonight..I thought I could get the job done tonight. Finish him off and get back in bed before you even noticed I was gone." He tilted his head. "But you woke up. Why did you wake up, William?"

What is wrong with me?! Why do I feel like this?! I'm going to wake up, and I'm going to ruin it all. What did I do to be this person, to deserve this--

"I..I don't know," he lied. "I wish I hadn't."

Hannibal moved closer, looking up at William with intrigue. "I don't wish to hurt you," he purred. "Not after all this fun we've had."

"None of it was real, was it?" William's lip curled. "You..are a damn good actor, Doctor."

"It's not an act. You interest me. I saw your name in the papers, looking for work, and I was curious about you. Once I saw you..I knew."

Will's stomach dropped.

You don't care for people...neither do I.

"You're just like me, William."

"No." Will weakly tried to shake his head, but it was impossible now. "I'm not a killer."

William had given over so much of himself without even realizing it. Hannibal could read him too well— he thought they were just alike. That sameness was enough to draw him in, and Hannibal's interest wasn't a good thing to have. It meant being under his thumb.

His body weighed a thousand pounds. "You're obsessed with me. This isn't right."

Hannibal watched him for a moment, likely deciding what he wanted to say. He eventually opened his mouth to speak, and his voice was tantalizing.

"I have ended hundreds of people," he whispered. "*Hundreds*."

"You murder them."

"Yes. Usually not in this way— I like to do it naturally. Avoids suspicion."

"Do you kill because you want to, or because you have to?"

Hannibal must have seen something in his eyes, because he suddenly began to stare at William like he was seeing something novel and fascinating. He looked like a child witnessing the world for the first time, his eyes hungry for knowledge and his mouth slightly open. Hannibal was drawn in by something that he had never come across before, and William wasn't sure what exactly that was, but he knew Hannibal loved it. William would look back later and decide that this exact moment was when Hannibal's obsession truly sparked. Before, that was child's play. He would never escape now.

"That's a very intriguing question." He was stroking Will's thigh now, making William feel itchy inside. Even though he'd been drugged last night, he had been perfectly present for the sex. He didn't feel violated— he'd begged for it, told Hannibal about how badly he wanted it. If he offered it now, he couldn't be certain he wouldn't take it. That is, if his body wasn't leaden and numb. "I like to do it. I want to."

"Were you planning on adding me to the list?"

"Of course not. I invited you because I was curious, and when you came I knew that you were someone who truly understood. I would never dispose of my potential companion."

"I don't want to be close to you," William rasped.

"I don't think that's true."

William didn't answer.

"I hired you to do a job, after all," he said. "You are going to do it."

"I'm not going to help you kill."

Hannibal laughed. "What do you take me for? No, I don't share my work. You're going to be exactly what I hired you to be, William: a doctor's trainee. Taking care of my patients."

"Are you going to let me go?"

"You are going to stay here. But don't worry; your quarters will be much cozier than Franklyn's were." He smirked. "You'll have the guest room."

Dread ran through William. "No. No, Hannibal, I can't stay here. I *can't*."

"I'm afraid you don't have a choice."

"No, you don't understand. I'm not..I don't..I just can't. I don't belong here." He couldn't fathom the thought of an...episode in someone else's home. Hannibal wouldn't understand, and God knows what could happen then.

"Of course you do. You're not some peasant, William."

"I have dogs. I can't leave them alone." I want my dogs!

"We'll go tomorrow and let them go. Perhaps one can come here, if you really wish. I suppose it depends on how good you are, though."

"Hannibal, please. I can't."

"I won't accept any more objection about it. You understand that I cannot just let you out and about. Not all by yourself."

"You can lock me in some guest house, I don't care. I just..I can't be here."

"You don't want to share the house with me."

"I just—"

"I'd be more willing to accommodate if you'd give me a little more context."

William thought. "..I have night terrors," he admitted. "I thrash. Scream. I'd be nothing but a nuisance."

This did nothing to change Hannibal's outlook. "I see. Well..I think it's safe to say that you won't be doing any of that tonight." Hannibal took hold of William's wrist and lifted his arm up. When he let go, his arm slumped back down into the chair like the limb of a doll, completely numb and inflexible.

"I'll put you in the guest room," he continued. "We'll figure more of it out tomorrow morning. For now, I'd like you to rest."

William scoffed. "Got a lot in my system that I need to sleep out, hm?"

Hannibal didn't laugh. He was trying to decipher something, judging by his expression.

"Do you know what they call me, William?" He asked. "A *monster*. A savage with no regard for human life. I'm a murderer, dear. And yet, all this time..you haven't said a thing about that."

The words stunned William into an isolating silence. It was true— he hadn't sprung to the insults, hadn't even thought to consider how horrible this situation really was. He was too focused on saving his own skin, and Hannibal saw that. God, he couldn't make a single move without Hannibal noticing.

He couldn't make a single move now, in general. Luckily for him, Hannibal had experience with motionless bodies; he lifted William from the chair with ease and carried him down the hall to a bedroom right next door to the master. He set William down on the bed and pulled the blanket over him.

"I'll clean your clothes," he assured William, although that was the last of William's worries. After a moment's hesitation, he bent down and planted a kiss on William's forehead.

"Don't ever assume that I don't like you," he murmured in William's ear. "If that was the case, you wouldn't be alive right now."

He stood and walked out of the door, leaving William to do nothing but sleep.

Vicino al Fuoco

Two dogs lay by the fireplace, full and happy. They've never known comfort like this, and William hates himself for not being able to give it to them before.

William thought that the fireplace would be tarnished for him now, but he still felt some sick comfort in sitting next to Hannibal. He liked to watch the flames dance. He liked to think about the ignorant bliss he'd floated in for a day or two, finally thinking his life was going to improve. He had been so wrong.

The day had been spent in a stupor. The drugs took a long while to wear off, and he slept through most of it. When he'd finally woken past noon, the door had opened and his dogs came rushing in. It took all of his strength to even lift his arm to pet them.

"They've been fed," Hannibal had said. "I wanted you to have them. They're well-behaved."

Hannibal had given him some bread, broth, and fruit— there was something so disgustingly tender about the way Hannibal fed him. Those strong hands offering delicate bites of bread, fingers brushing William's lips. It made him think of Abigail. Of purity.

Mister Graham, you've struck gold!

No, my dear, I've struck filthy coal at the bottom of the mine. The ash has rubbed off onto my hands and I can't get out.

When Hannibal spoke, William refused to answer. His limbs tingled as they regained their movement, and he spent a few minutes trying to teach himself to walk again. Hannibal had tried to help, and William pushed him off.

He'd finally had the strength to join Hannibal in the dining room when he asked; not because he wanted to, but because he knew better than to hold him off for too long. The meal was a beautiful piece of fish. Will wondered how Hannibal knew he was a fisherman.

They watched the fire now. William's brow was furrowed, deep in thought, and the two hadn't spoken for a long while. William's home, his bed, his dogs, all called to him, but there was no use in thinking about them. He wouldn't be leaving until Hannibal could trust him fully.

"You seem lost in thought," Hannibal remarked.

"I have to go home at some point."

"You've never mentioned anything you need to go back to. Got a father? Mother? Sibling?"

"I do, actually. I—"

"I want you to know that I appreciate honesty, William."

"You weren't honest with me."

"Your truth for mine, then. You tell me one, I'll tell you one."

After a long pause, William sighed. He didn't want Hannibal to know that he lived alone, that no one was expecting him, but he'd been caught in the lie. And he wanted info. "Dead, as good as dead, and nonexistent, respectively." He shrugged. "I just have the dogs."

Hannibal smirked. "So you're alone, then."

"Not technically. The dogs are valuable companions." He frowned. "Do you plan on keeping me here forever?"

"It depends. Would you run off and tell everyone?"

William didn't answer. Hannibal leaned forward, elbows resting on his knees. "I don't think you would," he said, "because I trust you. You seem to be loyal."

"I am," William responded. "I'm extremely loyal."

Just not to you. The unspoken words hung in the air.

"I have that in my favor. Besides— and you'll have to pardon me for saying this— who would believe you over me?"

These words finally made William look away from the fireplace.

"Your word against mine, William. The word of an American nurse against the word of a prized doctor." There was a small smile on Hannibal's face, as if the words were amusing rather than insulting. They cut into William's already small ego. "What would be my reasoning? My motive? Absolutely nothing."

"You don't have a motive," William agreed. "You just want to."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"I don't—"

"Honesty, please. Instinct."

Whatever answer William was going to stammer out was now useless. He had to really think about it; his brain was overloaded with emotion, but there was one that dominated over all of them. His heart fluttered.

"..I'm terrified," he whispered. And it was true— he'd never before considered someone who committed such vile acts simply because they felt like it. It gave them pleasure, enjoyment.

Hannibal turned in his chair, perched as far on the end as he could without falling off. He leaned forward, as close to William as he could possibly get. "Let me establish something with you, William," he began, his gaze boring into William's. "I don't want to hurt you. I never did. I don't plan on it. As my new apprentice...as my friend," he took William's hand, "you are safe with me."

William narrowed his eyes skeptically. "So are we acting like last night didn't happen? We're 'friends'? You..pleasured me. Kissed me. And then you assaulted and drugged me."

"Alright, alright. Whatever we are."

"What's my end of the bargain?"

"You're assuming that I want something from you in return. I don't. I want to keep you safe."

"You admitted to wanting to kill me. What's my end?" William repeated through clenched teeth.

Hannibal sighed. "Simply your silence."

"My silence for my life?"

"Yes." Hannibal's face remained frozen in a mask, showing no qualms about the trade-off. Maybe, in his mind, he really was doing William a favor. Resentment churned in William's stomach. He hadn't asked for this— it wasn't fair that he was stuck in this situation.

He had just wanted to be happy for once.

"Why not just kill me now?" The words came out impulsively, but William suddenly realized how true they were. There was no point to this, no point to this unending fear. A small part of him hoped that Hannibal would just end him there and spare them both the trouble of a relationship— professional or otherwise.

Hannibal looked almost hurt at the suggestion. "I thought we've established that those thoughts are not at all true. I don't wish to kill you."

"You snapped a man's neck in front of my eyes, Hannibal."

"Because he was a disgusting pig. Subhuman."

William flinched at his tone. "I would rather get it over with than live in this limbo." He sounded much more defeated than he wanted to, but it didn't matter. He was under Hannibal's control. "I'm not going to live through this. I know it."

"You will. I promise you that."

"You promise, do you?" He asked sarcastically.

"Have I broken all of your trust, William? Will you really no longer trust a word I say?"

"I trust most of what you say. Just not when it pertains to our..relationship." He paused. "I have to deal with you. And my feelings about you."

"As do I."

"I shouldn't have come to your damn party."

"Don't be unfair, William, please." He frowned. "I'm simply interested in you.

"Interest is separate from manipulation." He gripped the arms of his chair tightly. It felt amazing to have control of his muscles back. "Do you know how..*horrifically* offensive it is for you to prey on me like you are? To take advantage of my vulnerability...my sexuality. I don't deserve this." He grit his teeth. "You're interested in me? Come speak to me. Come treat me like an equal. Do not fool me into thinking you're someone completely different. Do not drug me motionless and hold me hostage."

Hannibal looked surprised, and he finally turned his head away to stare into the fire. His expression was contemplative and shaken, something that William wasn't used to from him.

"Goodness."

There was a long pause, the silence filled only by the wood crackling.

"..You're never going to believe me," Hannibal finally said, "but I am very, very sorry."

William didn't respond. He'd given so much of himself over already. He'd *wanted* the kisses, he'd *wanted* to be sexual, but knowing that Hannibal had seen him as some kind of object was infuriating.

"William. I've been shamefully rude. Abhorrent. You're right." He leaned forward, visibly shuddering. "How could I have let it get to this?" He asked softly to himself.

William wasn't sure how much of the reaction was real and how much wasn't. It was so hard to tell now. How could he ever trust Hannibal again?

"I saw such a potential in you, even through small glimpses, and I was desperate to not let it slip away from me. If I'm being honest..what I did to you? It's the only thing I know how to do. When opportunity comes, I've leaned to hold on tightly. Still, there is no excuse. None." He sighed. "I want your trust again, William. How can I get it?"

William pretended to be lost in thought, just to put him on edge.

"You can let me go home."

His response was delayed: a sigh, followed by a soft uttering of William's name. The answer was clearly a no.

"You can give me the truth you offered me."

"Anything in particular?"

"..Where's Franklyn going?"

Hannibal considered this for a moment. "The majority of him is going into the river. Certain parts, however..I'm going to eat them."

William's entire body lurched forward, twitching. "You.."

"I eat them. I eat all of my victims."

The room was plunged into a thick silence that William felt he could wade through. He was stunned, unsure of how to react.

"Why?" He whispered.

"I don't know." Clearly, unquestionably a lie.

That was enough. William suddenly stood from his chair. "I think I'd like to retire for tonight, Doctor Lecter. If you're keeping me here, I don't wish to be awake."

Hurt flashed across Hannibal's face, but William didn't care. He couldn't care, not after how hurt he was himself. "Alright," Hannibal said, standing. "I'll show you back."

The dogs followed them, oblivious.

Soon, they were in the same room that William had spent almost the entire day in. It was suffocating now, but he would rather be alone than with Hannibal right now. He just wanted to sleep the night away.

He suddenly felt a hand grip his elbow, and he spun around to see Hannibal examining his veins again. Threads of blue and red right under his pale skin, equipped to burst with just one little prick.

Hannibal glanced up at him. "I don't wish to do this tonight, William."

"I don't, either." Fear rushed through him.

"I won't tell you exactly how, but you will not be able to leave without me noticing."

"I sleepwalk."

"I won't penalize you for that. I'll put you back into bed."

Will turned away. "Goodnight, Doctor."

"May I say something?"

William sat on the edge of the bed and looked at him expectantly.

"I understand," Hannibal said, stepping closer, "and I am sorry. You can continue with this — whatever this is— and keep building this wall. You can act like you despise me. But with

just one touch.." He placed his hand on William's shoulder, squeezing it, and William couldn't help the way his body relaxed.

"One touch, and you melt like candle wax," Hannibal whispered. "It's charming."

Will's face flushed. He didn't know what to say. He was too conflicted, too angry. Never before had he been touched like Hannibal touched him. He wanted to run as far away as possible, but he also wanted to stay forever.

Will watched him go, watched him stride confidently along the floor towards the hidden hallway.

"Hannibal," Will called out before he could disappear around the corner.

The doctor turned, one eyebrow raised.

"Do not betray me again."

Hannibal shook his head. "Of course not, dear William. I know better now."

He closed the door behind him.

When the door to William's room opened, there was a large clang as a brass frame hit the wooden floor. It had been hidden against the door, triggered to fall when the door opened, destined to wake Hannibal up.

William didn't care. He didn't even seem to notice, in fact.

He walked down the hallway without worrying about being quiet. He had no shoes, nor a jacket. He passed by Hannibal's open door, and Hannibal was already on his feet, having heard the sound.

"William," he called gently after him. No response. He ran up to the man, tapped his shoulder, snapped his fingers in front of William's face, but William just wrenched away from him and kept going. It looked like he was going outside.

Hannibal sighed, grabbed his jacket off the rack, and began to follow him.

Il Mostro

The Monster of Florence is out on the streets again.

He trails after a man who has no clue he's there, licks his lips and waits for the right moment. He has no weapon— he doesn't wish to make a mess. He simply hopes that his hands will be enough to release this terrifying need. This need that could ruin everything he'd just worked up to.

His victim steps into an alley and pulls out a cigarette, his gaze darting back and forth as he watches for someone who could catch him. He doesn't look hard enough, though; his demise is waiting right around the corner, and he doesn't even take the single step forward to look.

When the time is perfect, the killer springs forward and cinches his arm around the man's neck, choking him. What he hadn't planned for was a fight; his victim rears back like a horse and slams them both against the brick wall of the alley. The killer grunts-- he scraped his face and knuckles on the rough wall-- and, in a fit of frustration, he uses his other hand to hit the victim in the jaw. In quick succession, he jabs his thumb forwards...

Ah. Yes.

He hits the victim directly in the eye. Any scream is strangled by the chokehold. He yanks his thumb out of the socket, and a string of pink liquid comes out with it.

He holds onto his victim until his face turns crimson, then mauve, then a milky shade of white. The man crumples, unable to stay conscious much longer.

The killer snaps his neck.

So much better. A warm sip of tea in the winter. A blanket in the cold.

He doesn't realize until it's too late that there is someone trailing him, too. Once he notices the figure watching him from the end of the alley, he jolts, ready to attack; that is, until a familiar voice whispers sharply into the dark.

"William?"

His stomach drops.

The Monster of Florence takes a step forward. He knows that he can hide no longer.

"Hannibal," he says in a desperate breath. He looks terribly afraid.

Hannibal steps forward and holds his trembling, bloody hands.

"Let's go home," he offers gently, and the Monster agrees.

What neither of them notice is the shadow of a hidden person darting away to the safety of their own home. They have seen everything.

"How long?"

Back at the villa, Hannibal was gently covering William's wounds with bandages, wiping the blood with disinfectant and watching him wince. His movements were tender, but his face was impassive.

It was the eyes that William kept coming back to. Every once in a while, he caught Hannibal pausing for a millisecond, staring at the scratches on William's knuckles or the blood on his thumb with a glint in his eye that was only equivalent to that of a hungry wolf.

There was no escaping this situation. William had just murdered a man in the streets. Hannibal, another murderer with more experience, had caught him. And now Hannibal was touching him like he was a wilting daisy.

"How long?" Hannibal repeated, snapping William out of his reverie. The two of them hadn't spoken a word since Hannibal found him in the alley, since they had walked back to the villa hand in hand, since Hannibal had taken him inside to get him cleaned up. All of that was in comfortable silence, both of them contemplating what this meant for them.

William's eyes were the opposite of Hannibal's; they were blank and dead, exhausted. "..Three years."

Hannibal smiled. It was the smile one gives to a child when they think they know how the world works. "Twenty. Did you get into some trouble in Louisiana, dear?"

"No. I thought I could run." His lip quivered. "That's why I came here. I was running."

"You cannot run. I learned that long ago." He finished the bandaging, giving one last pat to the gauze on William's face before leaning back against the bathroom counter. They sat on the floor across from each other, only a candle lit between them. "Please tell me about it."

"I don't know what to say."

"You asked me the same question earlier, and it continues to stick in my mind, so I'll turn it onto you. Do you do this because you want to, or because you have to?"

William thought. "If I could stop, I would. So I suppose I have to."

"Perhaps that was your mindset when you went into this three years ago. But are things still the same? Or is there a part of you that enjoys this?"

He didn't have an answer to that. Hannibal placed a warm hand on the back of his neck.

"Tell me your story, and I will tell you mine."

William couldn't help it. He loved his touch.

"When I lived in Louisiana, I lost my job. I lost my father. I was suddenly thrust into this impoverished life that I had never known before, and I was so scared. They took my home. I lived on the streets. I rummaged for scraps out of the garbage cans. I was so, so hungry. I have nightmares of those days.

"Then, one night, I...shot awake. I was alert and aware. But I felt like there was something deep inside of my stomach, clawing inside of me. It was like a murder of crows, gathering inside of me and dying to get out, even if it meant destroying me. It was so painful. I had to get rid of this feeling, no matter what."

Hannibal listened with rapture. He massaged the back of William's neck, and it felt lovely.

"I decided to go on a walk. I thought I could scavenge some food from somewhere; maybe I was just hungry. But..this man came out of nowhere. He grabbed me by the shoulders and was demanding for me to hand over my money. I didn't have any— I was literally penniless. But he wouldn't believe me. He kept following me, pestering me, calling me a liar and a cheat." William twiddled his bandaged thumbs. "And then he jumped me. Attacked me violently. It was the final straw for me— before I knew it, I had my elbow around his neck and I kept holding on, even after the fear entered his eyes and his face lost all of its color.

"When I was finished, I stared at him on the ground, and," he swallowed, "the crows scattered. For the first time in months, I was warm and full. It felt like home again."

"And so you kept going." Hannibal's eyes sparkled.

"The crows kept coming back. They still do. They come back just when I think they're gone for good, and this is the only way that I know to get rid of them."

"But you couldn't stay in one place for too long, could you? You bear screams like a sculptor bears dust from beaten stone."

William shook his head. "They..they never scream. I make sure they don't."

Hannibal's eyes widened, the first sign of true surprise in this man. He looked like he was witnessing a miracle.

"How did you get here?"

"I snuck onto a ship. I found a passenger with a ticket, and..I killed him. God, I killed him."

"How do you feel when this happens, William? What occurs when the crows scatter, and you're left alone with what you've done?"

"I'm afraid. Paranoid. Guilty. I don't enjoy this, but I'll be damned if I get caught. My life would be..ruined. Over."

"Smart boy."

The praise felt sickeningly good. "I used to be okay with strangling. That would be enough, but..it wasn't this last time. Not tonight, but the one before. I choked him to death, and it wasn't enough. The crows were even louder." He shuddered. "So I dug in. You saw him — you're the mortician. Your name was in the paper."

"You butchered him." Pride in his face.

"Sliced him left and right. Ragged bits of scalp trailing his tails of hair like comets."

"Beautiful." Hannibal couldn't hide the awe in his voice. He was nearly breathless.

"I thought I could..escape this part of me. Run from my discretions. But I'm still William Graham, and I don't want to be. I'm still a murderer.."

"..And you don't want to be?"

"No."

Both of them noticed the hesitation before the answer. Hannibal raised an eyebrow.

"I said I'd tell you my story, but there isn't much to it," he said. "Nothing in particular happened to me. I happened."

"How do you do it?"

Hannibal smirked. "That's something I'll have to show you in person. That is, unless you're desperate to stop."

William looked up at him with fear in his eyes. "I don't think I can stop," he whispered.

Hannibal leaned forward, and William unconsciously followed. It was hard to remember that they were merely two men, sitting on the bathroom floor and cleaning up blood. Their brains worked like the rest of ours. They were drawn to each other like magnets.

"I don't want you to."

William didn't respond. He just looked into Hannibal's eyes and watched the vulnerability seep into them. Slowly but surely, they were reduced to nothing under each other's gazes, forgetting about the past few nights and realizing that they were the same. William hated this part of himself; he wanted to stop, but the fact that Hannibal had listened to him and given him positive regard was so satisfying. It was a wonderful refresher from running in fear, from seeing his crimes in the papers and watching the public call him a freak, a psychopath, a monster. *The* Monster.

"To stop would be..dangerous. It would be ripping away a vital part of yourself."

"I don't want to do this anymore. The guilt weighs on me until I can't breathe."

"Do you believe that God feels guilt?"

William blinked, taken aback.

"Do you believe that His Holy Divinity makes room for humanity? That He can watch His very churches collapse in on His followers and also feel guilt? I don't believe He can." He took William's hands. "God created you. Do not shy away from the actions you choose to take, not when He has given you the free will to take them."

"I don't deserve to play with lives."

"Don't you? After all you've been through, don't you?"

"We're both killers." He felt a looming sense of defeat. "It seems we're at an impasse, Doctor."

"I don't see things that way."

"What do you see?"

Hannibal surprised him then, leaning in for a hug that made William feel warmer than he ever had. It was one that surrounded him, like diving into a lake that had been sitting under the sun. He didn't care that the water was fetid, or that he may drown— he only knew warmth. William buried his face in Hannibal's neck.

"You really don't want to be like this?"

"No. I'll do anything to make them stop, Hannibal."

"Stay with me, William." He kissed William's neck. "I mean it. I've made quite a few mistakes; I must make it up to you. Stay with me. I will give you anything you may need. I cannot stop your killings, but I can make the torture disappear. I can help you get rid of the crows."

"Hannibal.."

"I know about your struggles now. I can accommodate. Help you."

"I'll bother you. I'll be a nuisance."

"Hush. Hush."

William savored the warmth that bloomed in his chest. "If you're going to manipulate me," he said, "just get right to it. Please don't do this again."

"I swear on my life that this isn't malicious. I don't think you realize how awful I feel." To give him credit, the words really were reflected in his face. He was full of grief.

"I don't need your pity."

Before William could stop him, Hannibal was lifting up the bottom of his shirt, revealing the nearly skeletal stomach underneath. The skin was pale, and his ribs protruded from underneath tight skin. Hannibal sucked in a sharp breath.

"Oh, William, my darling."

"I don't need your pity," he repeated like a mantra. He squeezed his eyes shut so he didn't have to look at himself. The bedroom had been dark, but here, right in front of a lantern.. his features stuck out plainly. "I don't think about eating."

"You're starving."

"I just work a lot, that's all."

Hannibal pressed his hand to William's stomach, feeling gently at the ribs. "Please." It sounded like he was asking for his own sake now, rather than William's. His palm was hot on William's skin like a brand. "I will give you so much food— you'll have three meals a day with me. Warm and savory. I'll let you have some of my clothes, we'll get you a nice jacket, some shoes. You can sleep in that warm guest room, sit by the fireplace..you can be with me. You and I can work to make you feel better. Please?"

William wasn't sure when he'd leaned closer, but he had. His head was leaning against Hannibal's chest, and Hannibal was speaking the promises lowly into his ear. His shirt was pulled back down now, but the ghost of Hannibal's touch was still there.

"Why do you want this so much?" William asked. If anything, it should be the other way around: him begging Hannibal to stay, at least for one more night. Maybe another meal or two, please, please..

But no. It was Hannibal that wanted him.

Hannibal stroked his hair. "I must help you. I've never met anybody like me before," he replied softly. Oh, his voice was the gentle wind that rippled the grass. So soothing.

Me neither.

"..Okay," William agreed. It all sounded too good to pass up. He would be a fool to reject nourishment and warmth when he was freezing and famished. He pulled his head away and nodded, trying to hide his quivering lip. "Okay."

Hannibal's shoulders fell in relief as he smiled. "Good. Wonderful."

"Thank you."

"No need. It's as beneficial to me as it is to you. After all," he cradled William's face, "like you said, I'm a tad bit obsessed with you."

William cycled through a million different emotions all in one moment, but some primal part of him wanted to throw all caution to the wind. Hannibal had no shame in his sexuality, no qualms about doing what they did— why should he? He wanted this. It was sick and

dangerous on both of their parts, but he wanted it so badly. Years of passing by men on the street, staring for too long at their muscles, being lectured on the words of Leviticus, being told he was bound for a path of hellfire...he just wanted someone who knew what all of that was like. He wanted to let go. He wanted to feel *held*.

He was kissing Hannibal now. His mouth pressed against the other man's, his teeth playing at Hannibal's bottom lip.

"Me, too," he breathed.

Hannibal smothered the lantern and helped William off of the floor, taking them back towards the master bedroom. The sole lamp in the room was turned off, and as he blinked to adjust to the darkness he felt strong arms sling around his neck and full lips press against his.

"Is this alright?" Hannibal asked.

"Perfect. Wow, you're warm.."

"Stay with me," he repeated. "Stay, stay.."

"So warm...I'm so tired."

"Me too, dear. Come get in bed."

He pulled them both towards the mattress and stripped his shirt and pants, watching William do the same. Once their filthy clothes were on the ground, they collapsed into bed. Will remembered one little kiss, but after that there was only the darkness of sleep.

8- Dio

Monday, at the break of dawn. The sky was still a deep shade of indigo, but the birds had begun their morning songs, and the bedroom slowly began to light up as the sun rose. William and Hannibal lay in bed with their arms wrapped around each other, their faces so close that William could imagine Hannibal's long eyelashes fluttering against his cheek. He could only stare at the man in front of him, unsure of how to feel. This was what he wanted; there was no question about that. But it wasn't what the world wanted. No one could know about this, despite how much he wanted to shout his passion from the rooftops.

William finally understood the sonnets about infatuation, comparing women to beautiful flowers and lamenting about the pain that such lovely people can inflict on the heart. He'd always read them, but he never comprehended them. He wasn't the target audience.

Hannibal opened his eyes, and William made no effort to hide his staring. Hannibal's maroon eyes were calm.

"This is how things will be?" He asked, voice groggy. "What you wish for?"

"This is how things will be."

They smiled. Hannibal kissed William's knuckles, and together they were warm.

Hannibal slipped out of the room only once that morning, and it was to pay the servants and then immediately send them back home. Besides that, they slept with their bodies entwined.

The first few days of work under Hannibal's watchful eye were relatively normal. William quickly learned his way around the hospital, as well as the names of everyone around him, and he worked well with Hannibal. He seemed to know what the doctor needed before he even asked, which was convenient for both of them. They talked about work and work alone, letting William forget about all the horrible things that were soon going to sneak up on him and make him feel trapped and scared.

Sometimes it was hard to forget, especially when Hannibal had to hurry over to the morgue or a patient's experience was particularly bloody. William thought of filthy birds festering inside of him— no, no, it's too early. Not now— and Hannibal's hands twisting that man's neck. The parts of him that would inevitably end up on the gas stove, sizzling like pork..

Disgustingly enough, the idea made William's stomach growl. Now that his body had a taste of regular mealtimes, he couldn't get enough food in him. He never mentioned this to Hannibal, though, in case he seemed too greedy. He ate what he was given and moved on. So far, the only dinners had been pastas or pork served directly from Mason Verger. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Would it ever come to a point where William would be eating the same as Hannibal? Where they would split a victim among them? It made his insides churn thinking about it.

How many horrific things had passed through those lips, into that stomach? He'd kissed those lips. Felt that stomach on top of his own.

Hannibal was very good at making William forget about the bad things, though. Stolen pecks on the cheek in the supply closet. Moments when Hannibal would stand so close that his hot breath would disturb the fine down on the nape of William's neck, and William would go weak in the knees like he was tranquilized. A wink from across the room.

He knew he was being spoiled. Things were suspiciously perfect— it was all too much love at once. He kept waiting for Hannibal to step around a corner and wring his neck, prick another needle into his arm and make sure he felt every agonizing second of a fatal knife wound. Sometimes he felt like it was worth the risk, as long as he got to wake up next to him.

Every patient was polite and reverent, middle class and above. You had to have a good reason to visit Doctor Lecter, and you had to be able to pay the price. They all looked at him with a twinkle in their eyes, nodding along even when what he was saying was rather conventional.

There was one specific incident that stood out to him, though.

They were in a single room with a man who was having severe breathing issues. When he had first arrived the previous day, he had pushed his way past the nurses and demanded to see the best doctor that the city of Florence had to offer. Of course, the entire office had turned to Hannibal. The man was still unforgiving— he had practically threatened Hannibal to take care of him or else he would incur the wrath of "my men." Hannibal had simply smiled and politely ushered him in.

The man had since gone through a cycle of waking up, shouting at the employees, gasping like a fish out of water, and falling back into a deep sleep. When he was knocked out on the bed, his chest rose and fell at a rapid, uncontrollable rate.

He and Hannibal had considered many options, but they couldn't nail down a specific cause for the issue. It didn't help that the man was not at all informative when he was awake. He had complained of chest pain, making William think that this could be an infection.

"He hasn't been coughing all that much," Hannibal remarked. "Just the breathing."

"He's doing it while he's asleep, so it's not just for show. His voice is like sandpaper— smoker, I assume."

"A fatal flaw, in the literal sense." He sauntered over to one of the cabinets and crouched down on the floor, digging through supplies. "Perhaps I'll do some bloodletting."

"If he'll let you." Will glanced at the man, whose eyelids were fluttering as he dreamt. "I'm surprised you're letting him get away with this."

"What, exactly?" Hannibal was holding a syringe, which made William instinctually cross his arms to hide his inner elbows. He wasn't going through that again.

"He's been.." Another glance.

"He can't speak English. I've checked."

"He's been very rude. Disrespectful."

"Oh, if I let them all get to me, half of this world would be gone, wouldn't it?" He chuckled. "Besides, I don't want his men coming after me."

"I wonder what he means by that?"

"Oh, nothing at all. He's one of the Verdinos. Complete social hermits that not even their Nonna could love. The only men he has are probably homeless."

William raised his eyebrows. "Goodness, Doctor."

"That is the life that God delivers when you are a cheat. Swindled the money out of many families back in the day." Hannibal stood, carrying the syringe along with a few other tools that looked threatening even to a doctor. "Now the whole of Florence knows he's a fraud."

As he sat at the man's bedside, the man stirred. Hannibal patted his arm gently and muttered in Italian not to worry, that he was going to administer a painkiller before bloodletting. The man lay back, seemingly too tired to shout for once.

William asked the man if he needed anything, to which Hannibal turned to look at him with a surprised expression.

"You speak Italian?"

"I'd say I'm close to advanced." William shrugged. "You haven't given me the chance to do so."

It was true— since they'd met, their conversations had all been in English, despite the fact that English likely wasn't Hannibal's first, or even second, language. That was fine with William. His Italian was good, but it wasn't anywhere near that of seasoned speakers. Hannibal had always been the one in charge of talking to the patients, so of course he didn't know until now.

"How did you learn?"

"I lived in Sicily for about a year and a half before I came up here. I assume you know that immersion is the best teacher."

"Oh, yes. Definitely. Lithuanian, Russian, Italian, English. In that order."

"You speak expertly, although I'm sure you don't need my compliments."

"I'll take compliments from you. You always surprise me, my dear." Hannibal smiled.

"I like to do the unexpected."

"Oh, I know that. You can imagine my shock.." He trailed off. The sentence didn't require an end. He singled out a vein in the patient's arm and plunged the needle in. William winced internally.

"And you can imagine mine."

"Now that I know the truth though, I think it fits you. The erratic methodology. The brutal execution. And yet you still do a beautiful job." He got a dreamy look in his eyes. "Your victims were always admirable to me in the mortuary."

William frowned. He didn't want his actions to be admired. He wanted to stop. He wanted to be a safe person, someone with good morals. "I don't wish to continue forever."

"Nonsense. The things you told me that night..oh, William, they were so lovely." He was swooning. Hannibal was swooning.

"Did you ever feel guilt? Like I do now?"

"No. I knew this was my calling from God."

"God would never ask you to do...that."

"He has yet to punish me for it."

"Do you worry of judgement day?"

"I do not hide from what I choose to do. It gives me peace to fulfill my needs and feel no guilt."

"What we do is wrong, Hannibal. Evil."

"We have free will. I believe we can choose to do whatever we wish with that gift." He closed his eyes. "What matters in the end is your acceptance of God. Of Christ. I accept them. When the day comes, I will embrace them. Thank them for my gift of free will."

"I ask God for forgiveness every day. I still wonder if He'll ever gift it to me."

Hannibal looked hurt, pitying. "There's no need for that. That is Michelangelo apologizing for his masterpieces. What you do is a beauty in its own."

"I'm afraid I cannot pay you the same credit, Hannibal." He struggled to think of what they did as beautiful. To him, it was disgusting, something that disrupted his life day after day.

"I understand." He nodded. "But I will continue."

"..Will they always come to stay with us like Franklyn did? Do you like getting your hands dirty?"

"Not particularly, no."

The men's attention was immediately drawn to the patient on the bed, who had let out a loud, strangled groan. His body tensed up, his back arched, and his round face contorted in pain. Red and sweating, he began to convulse. The cot rocked underneath his weight.

William's head swiveled towards Hannibal, expecting him to be alert and on duty. Instead, the doctor was standing over Verdino, his hands in the pockets of his jacket, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. His gaze was fixed on the man's suffering.

Verdino's limbs jerked left and right until he eventually began to settle, his body sinking into the cot. This wasn't a simple faint, though; this was an escape of the soul, a weight pushing down on the body like never before. Verdino lay still. His chest never rose. His eyes never opened.

Hannibal blinked.

"I like to watch."

His breathing was too erratic. It got the best of him, William would tell the nurses later.

No, Hannibal did not give him anything. I should know-- I was there.

They slept that night with their bodies entwined.

La Polizia

"I'm very intrigued by your behavior yesterday."

They were in front of the fireplace again, a spot that they had learned to call home. The warm flames painted their skin orange. Hot air blew onto their faces and caused a light blush, rosy cheeks that they would later kiss. Night by night, Hannibal had moved their chairs closer together, and now they were so close that their forearms touched.

"How so?" William didn't have to turn his head much to look at him.

"You were very calm. Lied straight to the nurses' faces without a flinch. You could have told the truth, you know."

"Why would I tell the truth when you have something even worse on me?" He shrugged. "Your word against mine, once again. People would be much more likely to punish me than you."

Hannibal smirked. "So it's not because you fancy me?"

"That reason is a close second." William winked at him. If he wasn't mistaken, Hannibal's cheeks became even more flushed. "That's why you haven't told my truth, correct?"

"Yes. It's not a question of reputation. It's merely the fact that I am...captivated by you." He laced his fingers with William's. "I must give you credit. You are a pillar of stability, William."

"I do not crack. I do not cry."

"That's not necessarily a good thing. Sometimes it must happen."

"Not if I can help it."

Hannibal opened his mouth. It looked like he wanted to say more, but his response was cut off by a sharp knock on the door. The two of them jolted and immediately moved their hands away from each other.

Hannibal sighed. "At this hour?" He mumbled to himself, standing from his chair and walking over to the front door. That large entry room that William had stumbled into on the night of the party was merely for show; there was a much more convenient door for guests and servants right off of the kitchen. It amazed William that someone could have so much money that they had an entire room just for show.

Hannibal went to the kitchen door, opening it up. A burly man in a peacoat stood in the doorway, his hands in his pockets, and he gave a tight smile.

"Doctor Lecter," he said in Italian. William knew that this man should be familiar, but he couldn't place his face for the life of him.

"Detective Crawford. Come in, please."

That was it-- Jack Crawford. The lead detective of the Florence police department. That didn't bode well for either of the two serial killers in the room.

"I don't believe you've met my colleague, William?" The two men entered the living room, where William had quietly scooted his chair away from Hannibal's. Any kind of attention was bad attention. He stood, clearing his throat and preparing his Italian.

"William Graham, sir," he said with remarkable steadiness. They shook hands. Crawford's were calloused.

"This is the man I elected as my new trainee. He's from America. One of the most intelligent people I've ever met."

William couldn't hold back a small smile. "It is a pleasure to meet you, Detective."

"And you. I wish it was under different circumstances, however." He turned to Hannibal. "I figured it would be best for me to stop by before the papers got ahold of the news...considering that this has to do with one of your colleagues."

Hannibal furrowed his brow. "That's concerning, Detective."

Crawford nodded solemnly. "I wanted to inform you that..Frederick Chilton was found dead. This evening, around six o'clock."

William couldn't hold back a small gasp. Neither Hannibal nor the detective seemed to notice.

Chilton was dead? That same man that had glared at him with such tangible disgust, who waltzed around the party with more life than anyone William had ever seen? He was *dead*?

Hannibal gasped, bringing a hand to his mouth. He was a marvelous actor; William needed to ask him for tips. The only thing he knew how to do was look mildly hurt and concerned. "Oh, my God. How? Is he-- no, he's not okay, what am I saying? What happened to him?"

"No external injuries, not even a scratch. He didn't seem to put up a fight. I'm assuming he was unwittingly smothered-- or else he was poisoned. His wife said he went back for a nap and she found him like that about an hour later." Jack's lips were set in a tight line. "Of course, I wouldn't have you perform the autopsy. That simply isn't right to make you do that, so.."

"No, Detective, I..I feel like I must do it." Hannibal shook his head. "After all, he was such a good friend to me..oh, Lord." He crossed himself. "I want to do him justice. Do you.. so you think someone killed him? Or could it have been natural?"

"He had no health issues, and it doesn't appear to me like there was a struggle or any type of pain. His wife would have told us if it was something with his heart. He and his wife had eaten the same lunch, so I don't believe that this is anything natural. I believe this was deliberate."

"Then I must help somehow. I have to catch whoever did this to him. Or at least give you the information for you to do so." He gestured to William. "William and I will do the best work that we can."

William nodded along, trying to appear shocked by the development. He watched silently as Hannibal and Jack promised to keep each other updated-- Hannibal agreed to investigate the body and prepare it for burial the next day. William wondered if Hannibal wanted to eat any part of Chilton, and he nearly gasped at the thought. It was becoming immediate now, habitual, to think about what Hannibal did.

Chilton had been nothing but insolent and insulting, and now he was dead. He had disgraced William specifically, and now he was dead.

He was pretty sure he knew what had happened to him.

Once Jack had left the house and the two were alone again, neither of them seemed all that bothered by the loss. Hannibal walked over to William and kissed him on the lips.

"Let's get some rest," he whispered against him. "Dissecting is an exhausting job."

"No! No, my God, it's my husband! It's my husband!"

Bedelia Chilton stood in front of her husband's coffin and wailed, her throat hoarse and her face scrunched. The crowd at the funeral watched her with pity in their eyes, and a crowd of black-clad women were desperately trying to comfort her. It was like a murder of crows, their long dresses fluttering like wings.

He and Hannibal had both been invited, William's popularity having boosted thanks to his new position. Hannibal had let him wear another suit, and they were both looking equally dapper. When William had caught himself in the mirror, he had been pleasantly surprised by the way his figure had glowed. He looked less thin, even though it had only been a few days. He looked happier.

That happiness hadn't last long. The funeral cast a heavy air over the city of Florence. The sky was a dark grey, clouds congregating to match the crowd's mood, and thunder rolled in the distance. Chilton's death had cursed the whole city.

Hannibal had been asked to speak.

"Frederick," he said, "was a good and honest man. He did not deserve to be taken from this world. We must work to preserve his memory to the best of our abilities."

"They killed him!" Bedelia cried from the crowd. "Some bastard murdered my husband!"

The sight left William slightly shaken, and it must have shown in his eyes— Hannibal squeezed his hand when he returned and gave a little tilt of his head, offering to leave. William leaned closer.

"Whatever you need," he whispered. "Whatever the best option is."

Hannibal sighed. "Let me try to console Bedelia. She may need a mutual friend that's not trying to gain the gossip." He didn't give William any kind of loving gesture, but the look in his eyes was enough. "Are you alright?"

"I'll be fine, d—Doctor." He cleared his throat. They couldn't be caught delivering any sort of endearment to each other, not when they both had much bigger crimes under their belts. They had to remain in good standing. Out of the gossip.

"Mister Graham, was it?"

That's not it. That is not at all out of the gossip.

William braced himself before turning around to face Detective Crawford, who took off his black hat. "Good to see you again, Detective."

"And you." Crawford surveyed the area around them. "Such a shame, isn't it? He was a good man."

"I wish I could have spoken to him more," William replied. "I'm afraid I never really got the chance. The glimpses I caught were very amicable, though."

"You two would have gotten along. After all, being in such close proximity to Doctor Lecter.. that's a privilege not many can claim."

"I am very lucky, Sir. Blessed."

"Lecter was searching for his new trainee, correct? And he chose you?" His eyes narrowed.

"Yes."

"I don't mean to cause you any offense, but the public consensus before the party was that Chilton would be the pick. Do you know of anyone who would be...perhaps, angry about Chilton's prize? Decided to take it away from him?"

"And therefore would decide to murder him for it?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"Yes. We cannot rule anything out."

"I don't see the point in killing him after the position was rescinded, if that's the case. If someone was angry about not getting the prize, then they would have come after me."

Jack nodded. There was heavy suspicion in his eyes. "Yes. They would have."

Damn it all to Hell. Wrong thing to say.

"The cause of death was indeed poisoning. What do you make of that?"

William thought. "It makes things more complicated. We don't know exactly what food or drug was poisoned. Chilton and his wife ate mainly the same meals, so it's hard to pinpoint. Someone could have given him the bad batch minutes before he died, or even weeks before. We really can't tell."

"Someone could have given him the poison before the party, you mean? To take away his chance of being selected?"

"I believe that Chilton consumed something he wasn't supposed to have. Got into the wrong batch. He only bought food from the best of the best markets, only drank the finest alcohol. He would never take food from strangers. The only way something like this could happen is sheer accident."

"Or a deliberate betrayal from someone whom he trusted."

"I do not know of anyone who would have done that to Chilton. The last person to do that would certainly be Doctor Lecter-- if he didn't want Chilton to have the position, all he would have to do is simply not give it to him. It makes no sense at all for Hannibal to be a killer."

"I see." Jack paused for a long while, giving another long glance towards Hannibal and Bedelia. Her wails had stopped, so that was a good thing. Jack leaned forward and spoke secretively. "Mister Graham, are you aware of how many patients have died under Doctor Lecter's care?"

Will blinked, taken aback. "I know that it's common procedure for people to die in a hospital."

Jack frowned. "His numbers are above average. Customers go in there just fine, and they wind up dead. They call him L'Angelo Della Morte. The Angel of Death."

Will was taken aback. He had never heard that name tossed around before.

"If they're 'just fine', then they wouldn't be at the hospital. Back in America, I had patients come in for a routine checkup, and we suddenly find a deadly infection in their blood. Anything can happen these days."

"Detective." Hannibal's voice jolted both of them. Jack straightened up and gave a grieving smile.

"I was telling William how much of a shame this is," he said. "He says he never really got to meet Chilton."

"I wish they could have met. We've been so busy, and that's my fault. I'm simply doing my best."

"Of course, of course." Their interactions were so light, as if there was never any tension at all. "I'll let you two carry on. Wonderful words, Doctor."

The three of them exchanged goodbyes, and once Jack had his back turned William let out a long exhale. Hannibal turned to him, his forehead creased with worry.

"Come with me," William told him, leading them down towards the street with as little urgency as possible. They couldn't be seen running from a funeral. He took them down the sidewalk and in between two brick buildings, where it was nearly as dark as nighttime. The clouds were closing in. He tried to usher the two of them into the crevice, but Hannibal wouldn't have it.

"Do not corner me in a tight alleyway, dear. Our bed is much more comfortable."

"This isn't funny," William spat.

Hannibal pushed past him and stood at the building's corner. "What's going on?"

"Detective Crawford. Jack. He's.. he's asking me questions about us."

Before Hannibal could answer, a set of light footsteps interrupted him. It was the clacking of heels, purposeful and sharp, and they could only come from one person.

With her hands buried in her pockets and her face set into a permanent glare, Margot Verger stepped into the light.

La Donna

"Why, Miss Verger." Hannibal smiled without teeth, entirely superficial. "Good to see you. We had to slip away from the crowd for a moment. It's all so terrible, isn't it?"

Margot nodded silently. Her gaze shifted between the two men. There was a palpable tension in the air, one that they were all aware of, but only one of them knew why it was there. It wasn't either of the men.

"..I don't believe you've met my new trainee personally?" He gestured towards William.

"William Graham. It's an honor, Miss Verger." William stepped forward with an outstretched hand-- neither of the Verger siblings had seemed very warm at the party. Perhaps she simply needed an introduction.

Margot lunged.

She gripped onto William's hand like a vise, her sharp nails digging into William's palm. Her eyes were full of hot disdain.

"Miss--"

"*Il Mostro*," she hissed through clenched teeth. "*Il Mostro di Firenze*." She gripped even harder, and William felt the fragile skin of his palm begin to break under her. He grunted in pain, but he couldn't pull away. She knew. God, she knew.

"Mio caro." Hannibal stepped between them, his back to Margot, and pushed William away from her. He was at William's side in an instant, examining his palms and wiping away the tiny droplets of blood that were beginning to form. There were only one or two scrapes, but Hannibal was just as concerned as if he'd been shot in the face. As he raised William's hand to kiss it, William sucked in a sharp breath as a warning. Not here.

"*Non importa*." He kissed William's scrapes. *"Stai bene*?"

"*Sí*."

When they finally looked back over at Margot, she had considerably softened. She watched them with curious eyes.

"*Mio...caro*?" She asked, her strong voice now dissipating.

My dear, in Italian. A word that Hannibal had thrown around in English, but never in such a serious manner. It was almost instinctual, the way he reverted to another language and blurted out the first protective thing he could think of.

William kept his fingers laced with Hannibal's. She knew something much more damning; there was no point in hiding the truth anymore.

"My dear," he murmured.

"*Voi due siete innamorati*."

You two are in love.

The only option was to tell the truth.

"*Sí*." Hannibal's response came at the same time as William's.

"*Inglese*?" Margot nodded towards William, her face blank like she had never lashed out at all. Hannibal scoffed at her. He stepped forward with his eyes narrowed.

"I will have you speak English, just for the inconvenience of it. You speak absolute nonsense, Miss Verger," Hannibal said. "William is my friend. I know that Chilton's death has--"

"I saw you." Her voice was low and gravelly, and she didn't have much of an accent. Judging by all the foreign trading the Verger business engaged in, she knew a lot of English. She straightened her posture. "Il Mostro. You took his life. The man in the streets. You dug his eye out."

William's stomach plummeted. He felt the color drain from his face.

"How can you be sure--"

"I saw you, too." She turned to Hannibal "L'Angelo Della Morte. You took him home with you."

Hannibal stared at her, his lips parted slightly with some unreadable emotion. "I'm sure that this was all some misunderstanding. Perhaps we should go back."

"I cannot mistake your face."

He grit his teeth. "If you insist. You would not come to corner us unless you wanted something. What do you want, Margot?"

"You must listen to me, Doctor. As soon as I saw you two together, I knew exactly what I needed to do. You two would be nothing but suitable for the job."

"The job?"

Her eyes hardened. "I've been looking for someone to kill my brother."

Will scoffed with disbelief, while Hannibal merely blinked in surprise. "I'm sorry?"

"You've met my brother. You're aware of how he acts. He..he tortures me. He beats Alana. Beats me. Won't let us leave the home without him, and he controls all of the money. Alana is a disaster— she sits on the couch and weeps nightly. I cannot undergo this torture anymore." She blinked back tears.

"I've tried to tell people, but no one believes me. Detective Crawford has even written me off. There is no other way, after years of trying everything else— my brother must die. And you two are perfect to help me with it."

"Absolutely not," Hannibal replied at once. "Before you interrupted us, William was just telling me that suspicions on us are high. I refuse to endanger ourselves even more. And completely out of nowhere? No."

"But I cannot kill him myself. We have never gotten along— I have all the motive. I would never put Alana through it. You two are clearly skilled at what you do." She gave them an odd look. "And you can work together. I'm assuming you come as a bonded pair."

William couldn't stop the flush that crept up his cheeks.

"Do you grasp who we are?"

"Yes. L'Angelo. Il Mostro. Mio caro." Her eyes shifted back and forth between them. "I understand, don't worry."

"You understand nothing," William found himself interjecting. "None of this."

"But I do. I do understand, Signore." This close to her, William could notice the fragment of pain hidden in all of the sharp angles of her face. She was a sad person. She was going to do something about that. "You two are in love. You find the same love in each other as a man and a woman."

"I'm assuming you know someone like us?" Hannibal asked her.

"No. It's..it's me. I, too, have been struck with a love I cannot share."

The men froze. Their hands were still entwined.

Margot shook her head, her mouth set in a thin line. "I am deeply in love with a woman like me. She sneaks into my quarters at night, and her presence is everything to me. She kisses my lips. She touches me like I am prized." Her hands trembled. "I have never been prized."

William softened. He knew the feeling. "Oh.."

"She is my light. My muse. I love her. I have loved her for nearly two years." She stepped forward. "She first told me she loved me about a year ago. Since then, we have been together almost every night. You must understand how it feels. There is a connection between the souls that was not there when I spoke to men. I look at her soft face, stroke her dark hair, and it feels like I am where I'm meant to be."

"Wait—"

"She is so close to me, yet so far. We are forbidden. We are oppressed."

"Margot," Hannibal said sternly. "You're surely not speaking about—"

"It's Alana." She buried her face in her hands for a moment. "It's my dear, darling Alana. My brother's wife."

Oh. Oh, shit.

Hannibal inhaled. His face was almost like that of a disappointed parent. "And Mason has no idea at all?"

"He must not know. He will beat her harder than he already does." She looked dismayed at the thought. "It's why I haven't told Alana, either."

"You're doing this without her knowledge?"

"She would never look at me the same again, if she knew my intentions. But she wants this even more than I do, I promise you. The things she has told me in the dark..she holds incredible fury inside of her."

"Why now?"

"I simply cannot take it anymore. Plus, Father's will states that after the death of a Verger, the business and fortune immediately goes to the nearest family member. That would be me. This world may not allow me to run a business, not as a woman, but the money would be mine all the same. We have enough to live comfortably now."

"Margot, we cannot do this," Hannibal said. "This is a gargantuan request."

"Perhaps 'request' was the wrong word. This is a formal demand." She stepped forward. "Suspicions are high on you? I can make them higher. I will tell the whole truth about you two to Jack Crawford if you refuse to help me."

William flinched. She had them.

"Kill your brother, or you'll get us killed?"

"This is of utmost importance to me, Doctor. If you are going to play God, then I can at least make you useful to me. Of course, you know what it's like to want to do anything for someone you love. Mio caro."

She meant William, as made clear by the quip, but Hannibal's gaze clouded for a moment. He was lost in the past. When William ran his thumb along Hannibal's skin, he snapped back.

"To threaten us like this, to force us, is exuberantly selfish, Margot."

Margot smiled bitterly. "I have spent my entire life handing myself over to people who do not give a damn about me," she spat. "Sometimes a woman deserves to be selfish. And we both benefit. I get what I want, and your secret is kept. Hell, depending on how quickly you get it done, there could be some funds in it for you."

"Funds mean nothing to me when it comes to my cover." William recognized the look on his face as the same one he'd given to Franklyn, the same one he'd caught glimpses of when Verdino shouted at him. It was pure disdain; when Hannibal gave you that look, it meant that you were revolting. A waste of space, his next victim. William had never received that look. He hoped to never receive it.

Hannibal certainly wore a mask. The question was: which side was real? The emotionless slate captured only by violence, or the soft comforting force that kissed his hand? When Hannibal held him so gently— was the mask on or off? Was all he knew of this man fake?

"Please step away from me." Her voice was so collected.

"Do you know how much danger you've put yourself in, Margot, dear? Cornering two serial killers, all alone? We could overpower you in an instant." He smiled. "What's stopping me?"

"Please step away."

"You come here and threaten us, don't even give us the choice? It's rude."

Out of the corner of his eye, William caught a small glint of something silver in her hand. Growing up in America, he was extremely familiar with exactly what this was— his heart leapt up to his throat.

"Hannibal," he warned. "Get away from her."

The tone of his voice made Hannibal look back at him in confusion. Reluctantly, he stepped away; it was only then that he noticed the revolver pointed straight at his torso. His smile faded immediately.

"I also told Mason exactly where I am: with you, Doctor. I am not a fool."

Hannibal stumbled back and absently grappled for William's arm. William pulled him close, and the two sighed in relief. William looked Margot straight in the face and saw a residual terror that probably wouldn't disappear until she was home safe. He saw desperation.

They had no other choice. She had cornered them in every way possible.

"Does the method matter?" William asked. Margot cocked her head.

"I suppose not. Don't make too much of a mess. Preferably it would appear as an accident."

"William, you're considering this?!"

"We don't have another choice." William put a hand on his shoulder.

"I don't deserve to witness a scene like the one you two gave me the other night and then not expect a gift for my silence." Margot shrugged. "I could have turned you in minutes after.

I didn't. Wouldn't it be rude of you to not repay me?"

Hannibal paused. "Margot," he conceded, "if we do this, then you must protect our names should suspicions run high. Be our alibi."

"I can do that. So long as you do the same for me."

William nodded. "We can do that."

There was a long moment of silence, none of them certain of what to do. No one wanted to make any sudden movements.

William stuck out his hand.

They shook hands with Margot Verger.

"I have a gun," she reminded them before taking off into a sprint across the alley. The men were left alone.

There was a thick silence that was even more suffocating than the humidity. The men faced each other, and Hannibal opened his mouth to speak.

William slapped him hard across the face. Hannibal's mouth dropped open, and he clutched his cheek in shock.

"You fucking reckless bastard," William snapped at him. "Do you realize how much danger you put yourself in? She had a gun to your torso, damn it!"

Hannibal was speechless. For once, he had no comeback.

Thunder clapped over them, and the black sky tore open to unleash a downpour. The men were instantly soaked, and William's shoulders fell.

"Let's go." Hannibal held his hand and led them along the alley, running together towards home.

Once, Hannibal threw his head back, and William saw the flash of white of his teeth as he laughed.

Shakespeare

Of course, the first thing Hannibal did when they got home was start a fire.

They were nearly on top of each other, Hannibal's arm draped around William's shoulder. They were wrapped in a thick towel and shivering.

"You have brought quite a lot of intrigue into my life, William."

"Don't say that. You are just as bad as I am."

"When did I say it was a bad thing? I'm having quite the adventure, aren't you?" He seemed genuine in his response. Something in his eyes glimmered. "I get rather bored. This is nice."

"How are we going to do this?"

"Would you like the comforting answer or the true one?"

"That question already has me unsettled. The true one?"

"I don't know." Hannibal sighed. "From what you told me about Jack today, I'm under much scrutiny. I can't have another man in my social circle turn up dead. And you, you have connections to Mason as well. Besides, he'd never let you get close enough to touch him, let alone kill him. He's a picky snake of a man."

"If we don't do this, she'll have us both caught."

He frowned. "I wish you'd have let me kill her."

William decided to humor him. "How?"

"Distract her until I could easily take the gun. Take some inspiration from you, dear— I could choke her to death. It's clean. Quiet."

William didn't answer. He hated to be reminded of his horrific sins. The remark was the first raindrop before the storm.

"You scared me today," he said.

"How so?" His hand on William's thigh.

"You wear a very well-tailored person suit. I've seen two sides of you. The only issue is that I don't know which side is real. Is it this?" He gestured to themselves, cuddled together. "Or is it that man who snapped Franklyn's neck?"

"Why can't both be me?"

"I just..want to know if I'm safe." The fear crept up on him, settling on his shoulders and seeping into his skin.

"Darling. *Mio caro*," he replied, hurt.

"Are you wearing your mask now?"

"Of course not. Not around you. What can I do to convince you of this?"

William didn't know what to say. There was some horrible feeling churning in the bottom of his gut. Something was completely wrong. Physically, mentally, instinctually. Margot caught them because he was reckless. Hannibal didn't want him— no one did.

Cornering two serial killers all alone?

"Everything is going wrong," he muttered, voice shaking. "She caught us. They'll catch us, and it's my fault. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

"William—"

I can't have you running away on me, now, can I?

"No. Please don't make me heavy again."

There was a needle plunging into his vein and his limbs were so heavy, oh they were made of concrete and he couldn't move, Hannibal stroking his thigh just like he was now, his voice was so calming so smooth so wrong this is so wrong this is wrong something is wrong and bad and— and—

There was a familiar fluttering in his chest, and he groaned with dread. He doubled over. His wet hair slapped against his face.

"William? Darling?"

He couldn't speak, couldn't gather the strength to even sit up. He sat with his forehead pressed against his knees and felt needles behind his eyes, a vise in his chest. It became a physical burden to even blink or breathe.

It's the crows, he wanted to say. The crows are inside of me. They want blood.

"William, dear, are you alright?"

"Mm-mm." Just making those small noises with his throat was too much. He felt something nudge at his arm— the soft fur of one of the dogs. They were worried for him.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I've put such doubt into you. It's all my fault."

No, no, no. It's my fault. I ran out in the middle of the night and Margot saw us.

Breathing was like fitting a thread into the head of a needle. The wings pounded against his heart and the birds cawed to be let out. He had to get out of this house. He had to make himself into a weapon, throw himself into a kill so he could crack open and let the birds fly.

He moved to stand, but Hannibal grabbed onto him to stop him. He eased them back down onto the ground, and William's eyes were fixated on some arbitrary point far behind Hannibal. Everything would blur, and then he would blink and it would all come back. Blur. Blink. Clear.

"I have to go," he rasped.

"Why? Have I— is it the crows?"

For a split second, William was flattered that he was listening before. That dissolved before it could even blossom into a full feeling.

"Crows. Inside of me. Choking me."

"Is this always how they make you feel?" Hannibal looked contemplative.

"Yes." This was rather mild compared to some of the other occurrences. At least now he wasn't all alone and screaming. This was the first time, however, that this had happened without there being a night terror first. It was like the nightmares triggered the crows to wake up and do their early morning work.

Every time the crows festered, William only intended to go out on a walk. He'd wanted to clear his head, but every time, some kind of opportunity struck that was too lucky to pass up. Some drunk man walking home all alone, weak and vulnerable. Every time he'd see someone with potential, he could never shake them from his mind. His thoughts were consumed with *my hands around his neck my thumbs pressing into his collarbone and making purple bruises, capillaries in his eyes bursting and turning those yellowed whites into pools of red. Mine, mine, mine*.

The crows went away the moment he struck. As much as he hated it, that was the truth.

Something nudged the side of his arm— the soft fur of one of the dogs. Both of them had approached, worried about him.

"Look at that. Good dogs. Pet them, William." Hannibal smiled softly. "Just pet them. Get lost for a moment."

William did what he asked, mostly because he just wanted the comfort of home. He leaned over and touched foreheads with the amber-colored dog, long hair tickling his skin. He smelled their familiar musk. Scratched behind their ears.

He could almost imagine he was home. Not in his shabby hut, but the home back in Louisiana. Farm dogs and seafood. Music and the smell of salt.

The smell of fresh fish as Hannibal set his plate in front of him. The taste of salt lingering on Hannibal's lips as he kissed William. The harpsichord. His arms wrapped around William,

protecting him even in sleep. Enclosed in the belly of the beast.

He was just like home.

"You're going to be okay, William." Hannibal massaged the back of his neck and tousled his hair. "You're safe here. You always will be."

When he opened his mouth to sigh, it was as if feathers spilled from his mouth. The crows perched on his ribs, still present, but content to wait. Their numbers had dwindled.

"How..how did you.." His tense body released itself slowly.

"Are you alright to talk to me, dear?"

"It's not as bad anymore."

"This is how the crows feel every time?"

"Sometimes I have different reactions, but yes. Internally, yes." Sometimes I scream.

"William." Hannibal gave him a knowing glance. "I think we both know what the truth is here."

William flushed. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Your fear is a physical thing. It sneaks up on you, attacks you. And that's not fair; you don't deserve that on top of everything else." He leaned in to kill William's cheek, whispering in his ear. "But you do not have to kill."

William flinched. There it was.

There was a multitude of ways to calm himself down when things got bad. He'd just proven that to himself— all he needed to do was get lost for a moment, push away the anxious thoughts. It was a quick and easy fix. Inconvenient and scary, but something that could be mended.

Instead, he made the decision to kill.

"I think about what you asked me every day," Hannibal told him, reaching for William's soaked jacket and pulling it off of him. A chill ran up William's arms. "The question of whether I kill because I want to, or because I have to. I think about it because, quite frankly, no one has to kill. Not under any circumstances. There is always another option." He watched him curiously. "And yet, you told me you have to."

"I thought..they're not completely gone. They're still there; they're just waiting. I have to do what I do. It's the only thing that gets rid of them."

"Is it the only thing? Because I believe you have a choice, William." He rubbed William's arms, which were lined with goosebumps. His palms were warm. "You tell yourself there isn't a choice— because if there is a choice, you believe you're picking the wrong answer."

William shook his head. "No. No, I know who I am. I am not the kind of person who..does something like this. It's not a choice."

"When you told me that you had to kill, I wondered which of us you were lying to. Me, or yourself." His eyes were brimming with an emotion that bordered on pity. William hated it. "I know the answer now."

"Nothing else has ever worked," he replied, panicked. "This is the first time that I haven't had to.."

"When you stumbled onto the streets that night three years ago, you let out a dark impulse hidden inside of you," he said. "It calmed you. It gave you control. And, my dear, as someone who has been doing this for two decades..nothing else will ever give you the same kind of release. Nothing." He shook his head. "But as I said, there is always another option. You could easily sit and let the crows go away on their own. Accept that they are always a part of you, and adapt to them. But you choose to kill."

"Stop." William squeezed his eyes shut.

"You kill because it makes you feel the best, William. Nothing compares to the feeling of skin under your palms. Blood caked under your nails."

He despised how truthful this all was. No matter what he did, the crows would always come back. Killing merely staved them off for a little while— but oh, the way it made him feel. It was so much better than just sitting there and letting the fear fade slowly.

"..I'm making the wrong decision," he said softly, defeated. "I'm evil. I'm horrible."

"'There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so.'"

"You're quoting Shakespeare at me?"

"Indeed. I never pass up the chance." He winked. "William, have you ever seen a church collapse in on its followers?"

He blinked. "I don't believe I've ever had that experience, no. Have you?"

"Not personally. But I believe it is the perfect answer to your turmoil. The fact that a God could allow His place of worship to crumble and cave in on the people who love Him most..the thrill of killing must come before the love of His children. Killing must feel good to God, William, just like it feels good to you." He licked his lips. "And are we not created in His image?"

Something clicked inside of him, and William understood. The jumble of ideas that Hannibal was throwing at him began to come together. Hannibal truly believed that what he did was justified, that it couldn't be evil, because God did the same thing. He was doing the world a service, he thought, by ridding it of heinous people.

Because he believed that, he was free. He had no moral qualms. He did not have to lay awake at night and pray until his throat was hoarse, refusing to sleep for days on end because

the guilt was eating away at his brain like a parasite.

He was free.

William wanted to be free.

'Tempt not a desperate man.'

Hannibal smiled. "Now you're the one quoting at me."

Oh. He'd said that out loud.

"You must learn to let go." He pulled William into a warm embrace. William buried his face in Hannibal's neck. "You must let go."

"I want to let go." It was true. It felt so true.

"The good thing is that it's very easy." Hannibal kissed the top of his head. "Simply grab onto what you want, instead. Hold onto what you love, and you will be much happier."

William kissed his lips and held onto him.

"You are not evil. You are destructive. However, the forest could not thrive without the fire."

"I shouldn't have doubted you. I didn't mean it. I was.. I was very afraid."

"Oh, no more of that. I have not been the most pure of hosts." He stroked William's hair. "You and I will get past this. Mason will be an easy target. It's the after that we must be careful of."

"I am always your alibi."

"And I yours."

For a moment, William could pretend that the crows had flown away.

Chef

Work the next day was quiet. Hannibal was cautious to keep himself under the radar, not wanting to alert Detective Crawford to any discrepancies. People came into the clinic, and they walked out satisfied. Hannibal was polite and subdued.

In the kitchen that evening, Hannibal fixed them tea. They drank together at the kitchen table, and William was captivated by the scope of the room. The counters swept across a larger area than his entire house, and the wooden cabinets glistened with his reflection. Everything was adorned with golden handles and knobs, and in lieu of a pantry there was an entire wall of sturdy shelves. Spices, fresh produce, eggs, bread— there was not a single empty space on the shelves.

"I find things to be much more accessible this way," Hannibal remarked when he caught William looking. "Don't you think? Better than a humid old pantry."

William nodded in agreement and took a sip.

"You seem lost today. Are you alright?"

William shrugged. "Not really. This is..I don't know. I've been through a lot."

"Yes, you have." Hannibal smirked. "And I suppose I am at fault for that."

"Not just you." He traced the rim of his teacup with his thumb. "I'm the one who went and fell for you so quickly. Dragged you into my world."

"I got here on my own." He waved his hand dismissively. "But I appreciate the company."

William couldn't stop the soft smile that crept up his face.

"You need a break," Hannibal said decisively, taking a large swig of the last of his tea. "Come. Let's fix dinner."

"Let's?" He raised an eyebrow.

"Together, yes." He winked. "I'll guide you."

William had never cooked anything in his life. He had always subsisted off of what his father gave him, along with raw fruits and cheese and breads. Nothing that required actual cooking.

"..Alright." He stood. It couldn't hurt.

"Perfect." Hannibal beamed, waltzing across the kitchen towards the large shelves. He held out his arms. "Now pick."

"Pick?" William asked, shocked.

"Yes. I am nothing if not adaptable. Pick any spice you like, and together we will create a dish based off of that."

It was a monumental task for someone who had no idea what any of these spices tasted like. He'd heard all of the names, and he knew that he'd probably tasted about half of them just from eating Hannibal's cooking— but none of them were labeled. Jar after jar of fresh and dried herbs were before him in a beautiful spread of green.

"Wow." He surveyed his choices, reluctantly reaching for a jar filled with dark grey powder.

"That's pepper, darling."

"Oh." He pulled his hand away. "Um.." He reached again for a jar of plump green leaves. The jar was cool, and as soon as he brought it closer he could smell the earthy scent the leaves gave off.

Hannibal nodded, impressed. "Basil. Versatile. Sweet with a little punch. Good choice." He thought for a few seconds; that was all he needed. "I'll make a pesto."

"This is pesto?" William had heard the word millions of times since he'd arrived in Italy, but he'd never known what it was made of.

"It will be." Hannibal moved swiftly, taking another jar of what looked like nuts and a bottle of rich yellow liquid. Salt, pepper, and a block of cheese, all arranged in his hands expertly.

He set it all down on the counter and reached into one of the cabinets. There, he retrieved a mortar and pestle.

"Pesto, originating from the Italian verb meaning 'to crush'," Hannibal said. "We will crush the basil in here to create a paste with olive oil and pine nuts." He picked up the bottle with the nozzle on top. "Hold out your finger."

William did, and Hannibal gently dispensed a few drops of the oil onto the tip. "Taste."

Slowly, William put his finger into his mouth. He licked up the oil, his eyes closing for a moment as a magnificent flavor exploded on his tongue. It was rich and earthy, sweet with a lemony undertone. It was the most delicious thing he'd ever tasted.

When he opened his eyes, Hannibal was staring at him with exhilaration. He lightly took hold of William's wrist and dispensed a few more droplets onto William's pointer and middle. He raised William's hand up to his mouth. His warm lips enclosed around his fingers, his tongue brushing across the fragile pads. It reminded William of their first full night together — he sighed with pleasure at the thought. It felt so good to have this man want him so badly.

With hesitation, Hannibal finally removed William's fingers from his mouth. Not a morsel of the oil was left.

"Goodness," he sighed. "You are very good at distracting me."

William smiled. "I believe you were showing me how to make a paste?"

"Here." Hannibal tossed the basil into the mortar and added oil and pine nuts. "You do it. I'll start on the pasta."

"I don't know how to do this."

"Just crush it. It can't be messed up."

"I'll find a way," William teased, but he started to move the wooden pestle in circles anyway. He carefully pressed the wood down onto the nuts, crushing them into a fine powder. It was easier than he thought it would be.

Hannibal was already moving again, retrieving some more ingredients from the shelf. "I prefer fresh pasta to dried," he said. "Quicker to cook with a more homey flavor."

"I've never had fresh pasta, I don't think."

"There was a dish at the ball, I believe. An appetizer."

William couldn't remember the specifics of the dishes he'd had that night. All he knew was that everything was decadent and delicious.

"Now you'll get to try it again." He retrieved a bowl from below and poured a large amount of flour into it. He then cracked a couple of eggs into the middle and stirred it all together.

"This will create a dough," he explained. William kept stirring, watching the crushed basil combine with the oil to form a green paste. He felt accomplished.

In what felt like mere seconds, Hannibal was already taking a formed ball of dough out of the bowl. He sprinkled some flour onto the counter and set the dough on top, beginning to flatten it out with his hands.

"We create the shape this way. I'll cut it into thin strips, and it'll cook in just a few minutes. How are you doing?"

"I think I'm getting it."

Hannibal leaned over to look. "Perfect," he said, smiling. "You're a natural. Here, you can help me with this now."

He continued to press down on the dough until it was a flattened rectangle. He then rummaged through a drawer and pulled out a sharp knife. William flinched, and Hannibal definitely noticed. He looked slightly hurt.

"You never have to worry about me, caro. Here," he held out the knife, "you do it. I'll guide you."

William moved to his side of the counter and stood in front of the dough. Taking the knife, he stared down at the counter, clueless.

Hannibal stood right behind him, placing his hand on top of William's and guiding him towards the counter. He moved their hands to cut a thin, long strip of the dough.

"See? It's not hard." His voice vibrated in William's ear. He could feel Hannibal's body pressed against his own, Hannibal's breath on the back of his neck. He was weak in the knees.

They kept cutting. William wanted to turn around and pull Hannibal towards him, forgetting all about dinner to kiss him. But he knew that Hannibal always finished what he started— plus, he knew this was going to be good food.

Hannibal suddenly leaned forward to kiss William's cheek. "You're doing very well," he reassured him. "You're a chef now."

"Oh Lord, I'm nowhere near it." William chuckled nervously. "You're doing it all for me."

"I could move off of you, but..I don't think either of us want that."

"No." William stopped, giving into his desires and turning around. He planted a kiss on Hannibal's lips, resting his hand on the back of Hannibal's neck. "God, no."

Hannibal smiled and kissed him longer. "I fall for you more every day."

"Me, too. And your cooking."

"Right. Cooking." Hannibal shook his head. "Only you could distract me from cooking."

"I'm rather special, aren't I?"

"Oh, absolutely." He kissed William again. "Now let me get this water started."

He set a pot of water on the stove and put it to a boil. He tossed the fresh pasta they'd made into the pot, stirring it.

"Just a minute or two," he said. "There's some plates in that cabinet on the left. Could you get two? Oh, and wine glasses! I've got a white that will be perfect with this."

William nodded and did what he said. There were so many cabinets— "the left" was not enough instruction to know what to do. He chose one at random and opened it.

His stomach dropped. Inside of the cabinet, there were a few slabs of meat wrapped up in paper. His jaw set and he immediately closed the door.

He wasn't sure how much of that was human.

Hannibal had his back turned, luckily, so William chose the next cabinet and found himself successful. He sighed in relief and got out the fine china that was in there.

"Thank you, dear. And this is already done." Hannibal turned off the flame. "Bring me your plate. I'll serve you."

Hannibal piled his plate with cooked pasta. The pasta on its own looked delicious, but then Hannibal reached for the pesto and William felt his stomach growl. He scooped some of it onto the pasta and tossed it with the fork, turning the pasta green.

"There you are," he said, satisfied. "It's so rewarding to eat what you've made on your own."

"Thank you."

"Thank you, my chef. This will be the best meal I've ever had, I'm sure of it."

It could be one of the last, if we're not careful. William shook off the thought.

Hannibal had already noticed his defeated expression, though. He put a hand on William's shoulder.

"Hey," he said, "we're going to figure this out. Alright? It will be easy, and then we will be safe. I swear."

"We need to protect each other. I don't trust Margot to protect us."

"I don't, either. Please, do not worry. Tonight is for enjoyment."

They ate together, and Hannibal was right— it was the best meal William had ever had.

Mio Caro

William and Hannibal continued to stay under the radar. They worked efficiently and didn't get themselves into any trouble— and, quite frankly, it was making them both a bit irritable. Not towards each other, of course; in fact, they were closer than ever. The moment they got home, they were all over each other, slamming up against each other and kissing almost aggressively. They spent time in the bedroom, touching each other, but they never took things above a certain level. They knew they didn't need that. It would be reckless right now.

It was working well. They had almost forgotten about Margot and her threats— that is, until there was a knock on their front door.

Hannibal sighed, taking his lips off of William's. William was sitting on his lap in one of the armchairs, and he reluctantly got off to allow Hannibal to answer the door.

"Detective Crawford."

Shit.

Crawford showed some surprise when he saw William sitting in the living room. "Mister Graham. You're over here often, aren't you?"

"William has taken up residency with me,"Hannibal said for him. "He's here more than often. Makes it easier to work."

"I see. You must be very grateful, aren't you, Signore?" Crawford raised an eyebrow. It seemed like less of a friendly question and more of an interrogation.

"I..yes. I'm extremely grateful." He smiled insincerely.

"Doctor, I hate to be the bearer of bad news. You and I are friends, understand? I'm not taking this too seriously." Jack stuck his hands in his pockets. "But..we had an anonymous tip yesterday. One that said that you two," he gestured to them both, "were some of the last people to see Chilton alive."

William stiffened. Had Hannibal truly been reckless enough to be seen? Both of the men were silent, waiting for Jack to go on.

"Now, you see how that adds a bit of suspicion, don't you? Quite frankly, I don't know what to believe, but I'd have myself fired if I didn't at least come to talk to you all."

"Detective. This is ridiculous." Hannibal crossed his arms. "The last time I saw Frederick was at my party, weeks ago. I never saw him after that, and I certainly didn't see him before he died. William can attest to this."

William nodded along. "I haven't seen him either. Not since the party."

"That's the statement you two are making?" Jack asked.

"Yes," they said in unison.

"According to the tip, you two had paid a visit to Chilton's home on the same night he was found dead. Of course, considering the fact that it's anonymous, it's harder to validate."

Yes. It was completely a lie. Hannibal could have paid Chilton a visit before he killed him, sure, but William genuinely hadn't seen him since. The tip was bogus. Someone who hadn't actually seen anything at all.

"I know you and Chilton were close," Jack continued. "You were someone he trusted. And, from what we can decipher, this was a poisoning. Someone he trusted gave him a concoction that ended up killing him— and, allegedly, you were seen entering his home that night."

Hannibal's jaw set. "I'm beginning to think you're suspecting me, Detective. After all of this time we've worked together."

"No, no, Doctor. Not at all." Jack held up his hands. There was a flicker of fear in his eyes. "I just have to say that I tried. I do believe you two. I want to believe you, and I do." He looked down at the floor, shaking his head. "I'm told to investigate, and that's what I do. No grudges, you two. None at all. This tip was very likely bogus. I have yet to speak to Bedelia anyway— she could shine light on all of this."

William really hoped Bedelia hadn't seen Hannibal there. Things would be very bad, then.

"If that's the case, then I believe we're done here." Hannibal glared at him. "You need to speak to Chilton's wife. Is there anything else I can help you with?"

Jack shook his head, seemingly relieved at the chance to get out. "I don't believe so. Don't worry— now that I've come to visit you, I don't think I'll have to again. If you're telling the truth, Bedelia will reassure that."

Hannibal acknowledged none of this. "Goodnight, Jack."

"Goodnight, Doctor. William." Jack scurried out the door, which Hannibal shut right in his face.

"He doesn't believe us at all, does he?" He asked softly, his tone tight. His face was still blank as concrete. He was always this way.

"No. He asked about you at the funeral. L'Angelo Della Morte."

They were silent for a moment. William missed the warmth of his touch, how relaxed he was when their lips met. Now, Hannibal was wired, lost in thought.

"It's Margot," William said. "It has to be."

"Yes, I know. Of course it's Margot. She must be getting impatient." He rubbed his face with his hands. "We've done nothing, and she cannot stand it anymore."

"Then we must do something." William stood. "We've ignored this for too long, Hannibal. We need to save ourselves."

"This isn't fair."

"No. No, it's not, but none of this is. You and I..it hurts me terribly, that we must hide this." He walked to where Hannibal was standing and took his hands. "It hurts me that I am the way I am. I wake up and I believe that I am a monster. It's not fair, to have this brain. To," he swallowed, "to enjoy what I do. It sickens me."

"Monstrosity is subjective." Hannibal leaned forward and let their foreheads touch. William felt warmth spread throughout his body. "What one thinks is monstrous is what another thinks is perfect. And you..I believe that you are beautiful." There was a smile in his voice. "You are lovely, William. So lovely."

"I'm afraid I don't feel the same way."

"Do you consider me to be a monster?"

"No," William said immediately. "I don't. I've only ever thought of you as..as a comfort. As my partner."

"Then why must you vilify yourself? I see what you do, and I can hardly handle myself. You are so beautiful, caro. We are the same, you and I."

"How did you get over this?" William felt weak. "How did you learn to embrace yourself? Embrace what you do? Do you not worry about Hell? Do you not fear the consequences?"

"I do not believe in Hell, nor God. There are times where I like to entertain the idea, but..I don't believe there is one, truly."

"You could suffer greatly for eternity, Hannibal." William couldn't even bear the thought.

"I do not believe that. I simply do not. I believe I am above such punishment. I have lost all faith in any God. Should He exist, I would not worship Him."

"..Why?" William whispered. "What happened to you?"

Hannibal didn't answer; instead, he kissed William deeply on the lips. William softened, leaning into him and feeling Hannibal's hands on his lower back. Hannibal pushed him against the wall, pressing their hips together, and William flushed.

"What happened to you, Hannibal?" William had to know now. It was going to itch at him for eternity if he didn't find out.

"Nothing happened to me." Hannibal's hands snaked under William's shirt, feeling his skin. William felt his torso tense. "I happened. But not now. Not now, caro."

William began to undo the buttons of his shirt. Hannibal froze, watching with anticipation.

"Do you want this?" William murmured in his ear. "Do you want me?"

"I crave you more than anything." He licked his lips.

William kissed him. He bit down on Hannibal's bottom lip, and the man grunted and planted his hand on William's ass. William could feel his breath brushing his cheek.

"Then take me."

Hannibal, with his face as smooth as stone, took William by the hand and led him into the mansion's bedroom. The bed was lush and fit for many people, but tonight there would only be two. Just them and only them, separate from the rest of the world.

Each man worked quickly to remove their clothes, and soon they were pressed up against each other like magnets that couldn't stand to be apart. They climbed onto the bed, William practically sitting in Hannibal's lap as the two of them kissed. Each of them had a certain place they liked to put their hands: William went for the chest, while Hannibal always liked to touch William's curls. William loved the way he ran his fingers through them.

After a minute of this, Hannibal pushed William onto his back. He straddled William and leaned down, kissing his neck softly before biting down on the skin. Will moaned.

"Again. Do it again." He closed his eyes.

Hannibal kept going, nipping at both sides of Will's neck, shoulders, and even his cheeks. He sighed in pleasure after each of William's moans.

"Feeling alright?" Hannibal smiled darkly in satisfaction.

William kept his eyes closed. "Just keep going. Do anything you want."

"Anything?"

He propped himself up. "Hannibal, I can't think right now," he said. "I don't want to think about anything. Not about Margot or Mason or Chilton. Just make me feel."

"I can give you that." Hannibal shifted, moving his head down towards William's waist.

William's back arched in pleasure as Hannibal licked the tip of his penis. He gradually moved deeper, and each time William cried out his lover's name. The name felt right on his lips, like a promise.

Hannibal felt himself becoming erect as well, the taste of William sending shock waves to his brain. It was a level of emotion he'd never experienced before. The thought that he could finally taste William, to consume what was rightfully his, was thrilling. He heard another moan, and as William came, the substance travelled down his throat. The small taste he got of the man was salty, and he sat back and cried out in pleasure.

"Hannibal?"

It was like a shark smelling blood. Tasting William had set something inside him free, and he moved upward to kiss him once more. He savored the feeling of William's lips and tongue, delivering a hard bite to his bottom lip. He tasted blood, and he ran his tongue over the wound.

"Mio caro," he breathed, awe in his voice, "you are beautiful. The..the way you taste.." He ran his hand down William's chest.

"Taste more of me," he replied. "I don't mind."

Hannibal's hands came to a stop. "I can't. Gluttony never leads to good fortune."

"How do I taste?"

"Too precious to throw away." He kissed William on the lips again. More blood on his tongue. "I have no words for you."

"It's hard to ever render you speechless."

"Well, you have." Another kiss. "I am thrilled to call you mine."

"Oh, I feel amazing." William reeled. "You.."

"I can't worship a God that wouldn't let us have this." He kissed the red spots on William's neck and collar. "I refuse to believe that we are mere atoms, and nothing else. This..this is something above that."

"If we go down, we go down together," William said. "Yes?"

"No." Hannibal frowned. "If you go down, then I will pull you back up. It's only expected. It's only right."

"And if you can't?"

"Only then will I go down. But not without avenging you."

"I'm honored." William smirked. "I'm not going down without a fight. A bloody one, at that."

"That's my boy." Hannibal kissed him. "That's my boy."

They leaned into each other, becoming one warm body melded together. They slept peacefully for hours, holding each other.

But in the middle of the night, William awoke to the sound of screaming.

Mažasis

He didn't want to believe it at first.

A thousand possibilities ran through William's head, each one worse than the other. He'd sleepwalked and hurt someone, Hannibal was killing someone, Hannibal himself was being killed, he had died and gone to Hell— but then the screaming took the form of words, some foreign language that he'd never heard before. He turned his head.

Hannibal was screaming. Not a whimper, a little cry here and there-- screaming. He thrashed under the covers, brow knitted and tears on his cheeks. He gripped the blanket with white knuckles. His cries were desperate and almost inhuman in their sheer ferocity.

"Mischa," he called out over and over again between other words. "Mischa, Mischa!"

William knew that he needed to help, but he was stunned. Hannibal had never even shed a tear before, and now he was losing it.

"Hannibal?" He nudged Hannibal's shoulder. "Hannibal, you're dreaming. Wake up." He shook Hannibal and placed a hand on his forehead, which was enough to jolt him awake. His final scream echoed throughout the wooden room as his eyes popped open.

"Are you alright?" William asked, looking into his wide eyes. There was a fear in them that he didn't even know Hannibal was capable of. Hannibal trembled where he lay.

"..What?" He asked, groggy and half-lidded. He wiped his eyes.

"You kept saying 'Mischa.' You were screaming." William touched his arm. "Is there something you need to talk about, Hannibal?"

Hannibal didn't respond. He sat up and buried his face in his hands, sighing loudly.

"Hannibal?"

He mumbled something in another language.

"..*Caro*. Speak to me."

It was the first time William had called him that. Hannibal began to cry. His shoulders hunched forward, stray tears dripping from between his fingers. It was a silent cry, only discernible through his sniffling and gasping for air.

"Oh. Wait..I'm sorry. I'm sorry." William didn't know what to do. "Hannibal, I'm sorry."

Hannibal shook his head. "Please don't say that," he whimpered.

The only thing that William knew was that when he needed comfort, Hannibal provided it physically. He wondered if that was what Hannibal needed, as well. It was the only thing he

knew how to reliably provide, anyway-- he had never been a master of words. Comforts would get jumbled in his mouth.

He shifted closer to Hannibal and pulled him into his arms.

"It's going to be alright," he promised.

Hannibal hugged him in return, squeezing him tightly and burying his face in William's shoulder. William kissed his head and ran his fingers through his silvery blond hair. It was damp with sweat.

"You do not have to speak to me. It's going to be alright." He rubbed circles on Hannibal's back. "Whatever happened to you, you're not there anymore. You are here, and you are with me. I'm right here. I'm right here, mio caro."

"Mischa.."

"Mischa is not here. But I am."

More unintelligible words. William held him while he sobbed.

"It's William. It's just me."

"William."

"Yes."

"William." He nuzzled his head into William's neck, kissing it tenderly. He cradled one of William's cheeks with his palm and kissed his face. Normally, Hannibal's kisses were fiery and exciting, a preparation for something more or a breath of exhilaration after a long day. But these kisses..these were tender. They were delivered with real care. They were deep and careful and passionate, like William was something he truly treasured with all of his heart.

"*Mylimasis*," Hannibal breathed between deep kisses on the lips. "*Mylimasis*.."

"I don't understand what you're saying, caro."

"*Numylėtinis. Gražusis.*" He kissed William's cheeks, his knuckles, his face wet with cold tears. "*Mylimasis. Ačiu. Ačiu*."

William didn't understand any of it, but Hannibal's tone made the words sound so beautiful. Like they were words that really mattered. He pressed his forehead to Hannibal's.

I'm so sorry that this is happening to you. I'm so sorry. Should I leave you alone?"

"*Ne. Ne*." He choked out a sob.

William held him for a long time, his body rising and falling as he gasped throughout his tears. It was the first time he'd seen Hannibal truly crack, let alone have a screaming breakdown and revert to his native language. William wondered if he was speaking this

language because it felt more intimate, or because Hannibal didn't want him to know what he was saying.

The cries finally became subdued, and Hannibal was still. He slumped in William's arms, wrung out and defeated. He was quiet and motionless for so long that William thought he'd fallen back asleep. When he spoke, William startled.

"May I lay myself bare for you, William?" He asked, just as calm as if he'd never been crying.

"Have you not already?"

"Not even close."

William pulled back. Hannibal's eyes were dead, exhausted, and his face was red. William reached for the side table and handed him his kerchief.

"Thank you, dear." He wiped his face. "You always know what to do."

"I've had enough fits in my life to know how to handle someone else's." He shrugged. "I know how you feel. Or perhaps I don't. But at least I am here."

Hannibal looked smitten. "Do you realize how perfect you are?"

He flushed. "I don't think so. You might need to remind me a couple times a day, just so I really understand."

Hannibal chuckled, which was exactly what William wanted. It was fleeting, though. "I..If I tell you what happened, then you certainly will not want to be with me anymore. That is my greatest fear."

"No. Never. Not after all of this." William squeezed his hand. "You are the only person who could accept me for who I am. I..I have lied to myself for my entire life, and you've shown me the truth." He kissed his wrist. "I feel like a monster when I'm alone, but with you..I know myself. I've never known myself as well as I know myself when I'm with you.

"I have given you so much information about myself, and you still have not left. That is astounding to me. It is only fair that I give you the same treatment." William hugged him again. It felt much more normal now than being apart. "I often think about what Margot said. How Alana touches her like she is prized, and she has never been prized. That is how I feel with you. Please know that. Please realize that this isn't going to end. I don't want it to end." He reveled in the comfort of Hannibal's touch. "I would kill millions if it meant I could be with you."

It was an admission that he didn't even know was true until now, but it was. Hannibal was all that mattered to him. The killings were unimportant. The facade they crafted was unimportant. What mattered was what lay behind the mask, the farthest layer down, their fragile core. The man that cradled his face and called him *caro*.

He was so prized.

"I can't lose you, William," Hannibal sighed. "You are the only person I think I've ever loved."

William's eyes widened. "Love."

"Betrayal and forgiveness are best seen as something akin to falling in love." Hannibal was slowly gaining the color back in his eyes. "You fell for me, and I betrayed your trust. You forgave me. You betrayed all the trust I had in you by sneaking out that night, but I forgave you. We forgave each other. We trust each other more than anyone else."

"..It's because we understand each other. We understand why."

"Killing keeps us sane. It makes us feel good. No one else can understand that."

"I've never met anyone like me."

"Neither of us have. It's refreshing, isn't it?"

"It is...as if I'm playing chess, and the entire world does not know how to play. I've spent my entire life playing chess against no one. I've grown bored. I've grown scared and lonely and I've seen myself as a monstrous freak. But then..you walked into the room with a chess board."

"So eloquent, darling."

"I trust you." William leaned against him. "I trust you to lay yourself bare."

"I will cry again."

"That's alright. I will be right here. Always."

Hannibal took a deep breath before speaking.

"When I was a boy," he said, "my country was under oppressive Russian rule. I believe we still are, but I'm not entirely sure. I don't know as much about my home as I should."

"That's okay."

"There were revolts. Battles. It was a horrendous time to be a child." He blinked rapidly. "They took my father. My mother went out to get more food for us and never came back. It was me and my sister alone in that house with no one to take care of us.

"I loved my sister with all of my heart, William. I would spend my days distracting her. We'd play with her toys, I'd give her baths and let her have as much of the food as possible. I would subsist on mere bread crusts if it meant she had the best parts. I considered going out to get more food, but the night before I planned on going..it began to snow."

William inhaled sharply.

"Mischa was only four years old. The snow was heavy and long, and soon the pile of snow by the front door was even taller than her. It was..it was horrendous."

"You were trapped."

"I decided that if one of us were to starve, it was going to be me. I gave her all of my portions. I ate the tiny bites she left behind. We gathered snow inside and melted it, and we drank that. I suppose she caught something— ate or drank something harmful— because she got very, very sick." He shuddered. "I can't stand to think of her like that to this day. She was as pale as the snow, and she'd lost all of her weight. She kept me up at night vomiting."

"Oh, Hannibal.."

"One night, I woke up to her crying out in pain. I went to her, and," he paused for a long while, tears streaming down his face, "she died in my arms that night. I wept for hours."

"Hannibal, I'm so sorry." William felt sick to his stomach. He couldn't bear to think of what Hannibal had gone through-- and here he'd been, whining about his silly little problems this whole time. He had been through nothing compared to what Hannibal had. He felt so, so guilty.

"Do you see why I couldn't stand to see you like that? Emaciated and full of need? I know how hunger feels. How your stomach begins to gnaw away at itself, and it leaves you in so much pain. I had to help you, *caro*."

"You have no idea how much that meant to me." William buried his face in Hannibal's shoulder.

Hannibal squeezed him tightly. "William, you must not peg me as a monster. Please, you must understand. I was so weak, and all of the food that we had was rotten and covered in maggots. A few months before, my father let me watch him skin a deer, harvest the very meat that we were going to have for dinner. I don't know what my child's brain was thinking, but..I was so, so *hungry*." His voice rose, becoming hysterical. "You understand. You understand what it's like to be so, so hungry."

William was glad that they were hugging each other; he didn't want Hannibal to see his face. He couldn't stop the way that the color drained from it, the way his mouth dropped open.

"You ate her," he breathed. "Hannibal, oh my God.."

"I loved her so much! I made good use of her, I swear! She meant so much to me!" He was physically shaking, rocking them on the bed.

"How much, Hannibal? How much?"

"As much as I could before she began to rot." Hannibal retched, and he suddenly broke free from William's grasp and rushed from the room. William caught up to him in the bathroom, where he was vomiting into the chamber pot.

"*Atsiprašau*, Mischa. *Atsiprašau*!" He cried out to the darkness. "*Mažasis*!"

"William grabbed him by the shoulders and looked into his watery eyes. He had never seen a man so broken before. This, he realized, was Hannibal's true self. This was behind the mask, behind the person suit: all of this trauma, this guilt, coiled inside of him until it could not handle the pressure anymore.

"Get away," Hannibal told him. "I do not know why you are still here."

"You were a child. You were a *child*." William gripped him firmly. "There is no way that you could have understood."

"I understood, and that is the worst part of it. I cooked part of her by the fire and ate it like my father did with deer. Because I was so starving, it was the best thing I had ever tasted. I've never truly had anything like it since." He swallowed. "I acquired a taste for it. It was only during my first autopsy that I looked inside and realized what the experience had done to me."

"It became second nature to you. Just like we eat chicken or pork."

" Yes."

William thought of the cabinet full of meat. To Hannibal, humans were no different than chicken or pork. Humans had murdered his family, they had hurt him and offended him. They were worthless, nothing but a burden on his life-- eating them was no problem to him. It was a way to always come out on top, to be the victor when someone decides they wish to hurt him.

In the end, hadn't William done the same thing? Hadn't he gone out into the night in search of a victim, knowing deep down that this wasn't the only option? Knowing that someone didn't have to die tonight, but choosing to enter the city streets because of the way killing made him feel? Because it gave him power over the human species that he resented so much?

He had mutilated the bodies beyond recognition. At least Hannibal had been putting them to use.

"Since then, i cannot handle being in small spaces. I begin to panic. I get crows of my own. I cannot.." He gnawed on the inside of his cheek. "I cannot even have a *fucking* pantry, William," he whispered.

Hannibal hadn't wanted to be backed into the alley that day. His house was spacious, with more than enough room for hundreds of people. It made much more sense now.

"Please do not cry anymore." William massaged his shoulders, slowly moving up to his neck and playing with the back of his hair. He kissed Hannibal on the cheek. "This is a lot to take in, *caro*."

"I know. You do not have to stay here tonight, if you don't wish to. Or I can move you into the guest room--"

"I am not going anywhere." William held him. "I am not going anywhere."

"..Why?" He sounded like a child then.

"Because I need you." It was hard to see Hannibal in the dark bathroom, but as his eyes adjusted William could make out the beautiful contours of his face. "You are still the man I love."

"I love you," Hannibal said, his voice raspy. "Oh, how I love you, WIlliam.."

"You are all I've ever been looking for. Nothing can change how I feel about you. Nothing can erase that rush you give me, caro. And the fact that you trust me enough to tell all of this to me.. that just makes me love you more."

He kept thinking about Hannibal's tender kisses. "You never told me what those words mean," he said.

"*Mylimasis*. Beloved. *Numylėtinis*. Darling. *Gražusis*. Beautiful."

They sat on the floor for what felt like hours, listening to each other breathe. Hannibal had finally calmed down, and his body became heavy in William's arms.

"How about we get you some water?" William asked him. "And then go back to bed?"

"Perhaps I need something stronger." Hannibal chuckled for the first time in a long time. "My colleagues have the right idea. Chilton with his wine, Mason toting around a martini more often than not..helps one forget the pain."

"Oh, I'm not letting you drown in the drink, beloved."

"If I turn into Mason, just put me down."

Mason's obnoxious laugh, the way he was carelessly holding that martini in his hands. He could shatter the glass and get a new one all in the course of under a minute.

Mason toting around a martini. Wait. All the time? There was an idea forming inside of him.

"Hannibal." William felt a rush of adrenaline through his body. "I think I know what we're going to do."

Olive

William hadn't realized how much he missed the scent of the market. As he stood with the warm sun against his skin, he inhaled the familiar smell of fresh fish and heard the chatter of vendors from every direction. He smiled to himself— he would never need to work here ever again. He had everything he could ever need with Hannibal. He felt a warmth blossoming inside of his stomach as he realized that he would probably never be starving again.

He wasn't here to reminisce. He walked over to the eastern side and sought out the familiar face he was looking for.

"Mister Graham!"

His smile turned into a grin as he spun around. "Abigail, my dearest."

The girl was glowing as always. She leaned across the wooden counter and pushed a lock of dark hair behind her ear. "I haven't seen your face around here in weeks!" She looked him up and down. "I saw your name in the papers. I knew you would get the job. You look absolutely refreshed."

"I couldn't have done it without you," he said. "You had to convince me to go."

"Sometimes people just need a voice of reason." She tossed her hair, giving a knowing smirk. "Don't be ashamed."

William chuckled. "I appreciate your smarts. No more free pity fruit for me, Abigail. I've come with a goal in mind."

"I'll do my best."

He leaned forward slightly. "Hannibal's having a little get-together with some colleagues, and they're all drinkers. He wants olives for martinis. He's already fermenting the grapes, so we don't need any of those, I believe.." He pretended to ponder over a list in his head, as if he didn't have his mind set on the olives alone.

Her eyes widened with awe. "He ferments his own grapes?"

"He does. He stands for nothing less than sophistication."

"A man of taste. I'm not a drinker, obviously, but I can appreciate hard work." Abigail turned and scoured the small set of shelves that were behind her, the ones her family set up and took down every day they came to the market. On the left were jar after jar of fresh and pickled olives. "Green, yes?"

"Yes, please."

She picked the plumpest ones and set the jar down. "Okay, does he want fresh lemons? Anything for dinner?"

"He told me to just get things for drinks. I won't spend his money on things he didn't ask for." William rummaged through his pockets and pulled out proper change. "I can actually pay you now." He slid way more than enough across the counter to her.

"The end of an era." She took the money from his hand. "Let me get change—"

"Keep it. Please." He waved his hand. "I'll tell him they cost more."

"I don't want you to get in trouble." She flushed.

"I won't. He loves me." He smiled. "It's all yours."

He felt an odd emptiness in his stomach as he realized that this may be one of his final times at the market. He had no idea what would come of their plan, and no matter what, Detective Crawford was on their heels. Running may be an inevitability.

He would miss Abigail. He would miss her almost parental protectiveness, her kindness, her wit. She was going places.

"I really appreciate it—"

"Abigail." William placed a hand on her shoulder. "Thank you. Really."

Abigail looked down at the counter, laughing nervously. "This feels like a goodbye, Mister Graham."

"I'm going to be very busy. Hannibal has me on my toes." He hated lying to her. He hated the bitter taste it left in his mouth.

"You're always a welcome sight."

"And you are always my favorite vendor. Always will be."

Abigail's eyes looked more serious now. "Be safe, Mister Graham. Enjoy your new life. Find a time to come back when you can."

"I will. Thank you. Take care of yourself."

With one last lingering glance at her, William forced himself to turn and walk away. He was barely a few yards from the stand, however, when Abigail called his name.

She was holding an apple. She tossed it to him, and he caught it; it was still warm from her grip.

"On the house."

"Much appreciated."

The apple was crisp and juicy, and he savored the last little taste of innocence he would ever have again in his life.

The Monster of Florence cannot take it anymore.

He has not been out in weeks, not since he'd been caught by the man who was now his lover. He'd gotten lucky then— the right person had stumbled upon him. Had it been the wrong person...he shudders to think about how his freedom would have been ripped away from him. He has to be more careful, he tells himself.

Right now, he craves the feeling of a body going limp underneath him. Blood between his fingers. The last breath rustling his hair.

He has nearly made it out of the kitchen, butcher knife in his hand, when his lover walks in. He rubs his eyes and stares at the Monster, taking in the sight. There must be something in the Monster's eyes that tells him everything he needs to know, for he simply walks over to him and kisses him on the cheek.

"Please be careful," his lover asks. "I cannot lose you."

The Monster blushes. "I'm sorry. I need it—"

"I understand. Go, please." His lover squeezes his hand. "Just be careful."

It is the first time he's been out with the strict intention to kill. Before, he had tried to deny it in so many ways— telling himself he was just going for a stroll, nothing suspicious. The killings would be erratic, something he hadn't set out to do but rather followed through on an irresistible impulse.

Love has changed him. It has taught him to let go. It has taught him that he can go out and do something heinous, and there will still be someone at home waiting for him.

His victim thrashes underneath him, and he loves it. He feels the warm skin pressing into his palms as he presses the neck against the ground.

Blood streams out from the body as the Monster slices down the middle. He uses what he's learned from his medical teachings and splits open the cavity. He's searching for the heart.

It's smaller than he thought it would be, still bright red with the oxygenated blood of the fresh kill. It is warm and slimy in his hand.

He brings it home, washes it, and sets it in the cabinet with the rest of the paper-wrapped meat. He throws his soaked clothing into the fireplace. He washes himself of sticky blood, changing into clothes his lover has already set out for him. He feels warm and clean when he slips back into bed, still hours to go before dawn.

"I brought you something," he says to his lover, who has sleepily opened his eyes. "A delicacy."

His eyes widen. "William—"

"May I dine with you?"

"I suppose we're done, then."

William and Hannibal sat together at the desk in the home office, examining the little jar of olives that they'd painstakingly experimented on. It sat before them, nothing suspicious about it at all. It looked just as it had when William bought it.

Mason would never suspect the heavy amounts of arsenic that had been dissolved into the juice. It was the crack of dawn now; by this afternoon, it would seep into the olives, and Hannibal was going to pour more of the juice into Mason's drink for good measure. It didn't have to be enough to kill him. That was not going to be their job.

"I made the right decision, hiring you." Hannibal's eyes sparkled. "You're brilliant."

"You're just excited. I am not at all smarter than you."

"You've tied up every loose end. And with this method of disposal, no one would ever suspect us. It will be a tragic accident."

"..Sure. Tragic."

When William had gone to see Margot after visiting the market, he'd been greeted by Alana first. She was a beautiful woman, shy but friendly, and she doted on him the entire time. William was sharp enough to notice the way she flinched when Mason laughed too loud, how her muscles tensed when he touched her. William did not feel any guilt at all for what they were about to do.

"Mason's very excited to have us over today," William said. "The girls are going to visit Alana's mother, he said. Wouldn't stop going on about how much of a burden the women of the house are."

"Unspeakably rude. Ugly." Hannibal's lip curled. "I cannot wait."

"Don't get too desperate. If you're too obvious, we're both finished."

"And we can come home to a lovely dinner." He grinned. "All thanks to you, caro."

"..Does eating them make you feel as good as killing them does?"

Hannibal's eyes shone with intrigue. "Oh, even better," he whispered. "Even better."

He wrapped his arms around Hannibal's neck, leaning his forehead on the man's chest. It felt better to say these things when he couldn't see Hannibal. When he didn't have to look anyone in the eyes.

"I didn't have any crows last night," he confessed. "I went because I was craving something. Yearning to get something out of my system. I chose to go."

"Oh, you masterpiece." Hannibal sighed with pleasure. "I couldn't ask for anything better."

"It felt wonderful. It felt even more wonderful to come back home to you."

"How does it feel to let go? To accept what you want?"

"So amazing."

"I'm sure." He trailed his finger down William's back, making him shudder with delight. He already felt heavy with sleep, and the sparks that Hannibal sent through his body made him want to collapse. "Your gift means the world to me."

"I want to dine with the man I love."

"They will not find him until tomorrow morning. We have plenty of time."

The plan was to go visit Mason and poison his drink, then take care of the body. They would leave, and no one would find Mason until it was too late— they would tell Detective Crawford that they'd left the moment Mason started getting to drunk for their tastes. William had spoken to Margot alone yesterday— she had agreed to hide Mason's body until the morning to minimize suspicion. It would be easy to claim he'd gone out for the night.

Hannibal was right: Detective Crawford may not even think about them. It would be an accident. Nothing more, nothing less.

"Are you nervous?"

William shrugged. "No. I'm ready to get this conflict out of my life."

"I cannot wait to have dinner with you, mylimasis."

William felt Hannibal's heartbeat against his ear. "This is not sustainable, Hannibal," he said. "We are going to get caught someday."

"I know. That's why we are going to run."

"Run?" William finally pulled back.

"I own a home in the countryside, far away from here. We are going to escape before suspicions run too high; we can claim the money is better over there. You and I can become doctors there. We can sprawl out on green fields and hold each other. Perhaps the yard will permit a garden." He looked lost in the fantasy. "Wouldn't that be lovely?"

"Yes. Yes!" William felt wide awake now. "Oh, do you mean all of that?"

"Yes. It's more modest than this home, but we don't need any more than room for two. It is so cozy in there."

"Tell me more." William was beaming. "Is there water nearby? Could the dogs run there?"

Hannibal laughed, and William swooned. "Let me fix us some tea. I'll tell you all about it. Leave that here," he gestured to the jar. "We'll take it when we leave at one."

They went to anticipate their new life. No matter what, though, William couldn't shake the worry that was squirming at the bottom of his gut.

Maiali

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As promised, Margot and Alana were nowhere to be found when the men arrived. Mason opened the door, greeting them with exaggerated hospitality, and they all entered the thankfully empty house. It felt hollow and soulless.

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," Mason teased, "allow me to give you the tour."

The house was unremarkable on its own— William suffered through Mason's unbearable jokes as he was shown around to bedrooms and dining rooms and rooms that honestly didn't seem to serve a purpose. He thought of Hannibal's unnecessarily massive entryway, the one that was only for show.

"And here.." Upstairs, Mason stopped at a large set of wooden doors, quirking an eyebrow. "This is where the real magic is."

He pushed the doors open to reveal a massive walkway, positioned over the barn where he kept the hogs. Sunlight streamed in through high windows, illuminating the otherwise dark barn. William looked over the fragile railing and saw hundreds of pigs, all squealing and packed together. They had no space at all, they were pressed against each other, and they were thinner than William thought they should be. They somehow got louder as Mason's voice rang throughout the room, as if there was some desperate hope that he would give them food.

"The Verger supply." Mason grinned. "We boast the most efficient pork production in all of Italy, my friends, and you are now witness to it." He gazed over the railing with pride. "Up here, I can deliver their rations without them getting too vicious. One thing you may or may not know about hogs— they'll eat anything and everything. Including you or me. Can't get too close."

"Then how do you kill them?" Hannibal asked.

"That's a whole other room. I won't show you unless you're particularly interested." He gave a knowing smirk. "It kind of preserves the magic if it's hidden, doesn't it? Erases the guilt?"

"I don't feel guilty for eating anything."

Mason cackled loudly, leaning against Hannibal and slapping his arm. William had never met a man who acted so drunk when he was actually sober. "Good way to be!"

William watched Hannibal's gaze harden the second Mason turned his back.

"Now, my manners. God." Mason shook his head. "Drinks, *Signores*."

The kitchen was too bright. Everything was too bright. He missed the cozy yellow aura of Hannibal's home.

"Speaking of.." Hannibal gave William a meaningful glance. "We brought a host gift."

William plastered on a smile and pulled the jar from his jacket pocket. "The finest olives in Florence. Can't get anything better than this. I personally know the family that grows them — only the best."

Mason cackled again, snatching the jar from William's hands. "You two are saints," he said, not offering any other type of thanks. "I'll fix you drinks."

They watched in silence as Mason prepared the gin and vermouth. He dispensed some ice into the mixing glass and stirred everything up, pouring the liquid into martini glasses.

"No olives for us, please," Hannibal interjected before Mason could garnish the drinks. "They're all yours. Don't waste them on guests."

Any decent person would shake this offer off and give their guests olives anyway. However, the selfish logic seemed to make perfect sense to Mason Verger— he gave the two their drinks without olives. William held back a sigh of relief.

"Anyway, come sit. I want to discuss some things with you two. Bring that mixer, if you think you'll want more."

The looks the two gave each other both had the same message behind them: this was an ominous statement. Did Mason know something he wasn't supposed to know? Were they finished before they could even begin?

William grabbed the pitcher and the jar of olives, impulsively pouring the arsenic-rich juice into the pitcher. He made sure that he set everything right next to Mason's chair. The olives were in front, right in his field of vision.

"Remind me not to refill," William hinted, glaring heavily at Hannibal. "Have to get up early tomorrow."

Hannibal gave an almost imperceptible nod.

"So." Mason pulled his olive off of the toothpick and stirred it around the drink. He began to pick his teeth. "You're aware of what happened to Frederick."

Hannibal nodded. "Indeed. I was apart of the autopsy."

"Really now?" He leaned forward. "Anything suspicious there?"

"We know something poisoned him. That's about it. We don't know the type, or when, or what exactly did it." Hannibal shrugged. "As much as I adore forensic examination, it's rather limited."

This was the exact reason that Hannibal could be scary sometimes. His lies rolled off the tongue as easily as the truth, and he had somehow found a way to poison someone without William even noticing he'd left the house. He could examine the body and cover his tracks while hiding the real truth.

"It's such a shame, isn't it?" Mason shook his head, but there was no sympathy in his eyes. "Y'know, my eyes are on the wife. But that's neither here nor there." He waved his hand dismissively. "The problem is that Frederick and I were business partners. We had a little arrangement going, and now it's all been cut loose."

"An arrangement?" William furrowed his brow.

"I shouldn't be telling you. It's a massive risk on my part." He drained his glass and refilled it, popping the olive in his mouth. "Wow. You're right, these are fresh. Good pick."

"Mason." Hannibal set his drink down. "We've been colleagues for many years now. Talking to me is not a risk. If I do not approve, the worst I can do is refuse and move on."

"Oh, there's a lot worse you could do in this situation. Send Crawford on my ass, is what you could do." He laughed. "Thing is...Chilton's the one who suggested it. Never really crossed my mind until he brought it up, swear on *mia madre*."

"Brought what up?"

"Frederick loved money, *Dottore*. More than he loved human life, if you catch my drift." He rubbed his thumb across his fingers.

Both of the men raised their eyebrows. "Mafia?" Hannibal asked.

"Oh, please. That *codardo* would piss himself if faced with the mafia. No, he was just a little crazy in the head, get me? Willing to do whatever he could for a bit of cash."

"So what did he offer you?"

"You will think I'm insane for taking it." He leaned far back in his chair, stretching his legs out in front of him.

"A life for a *lira*?"

"All I will tell you is, the Verger fortune is massive." He took another swig. "And it is split evenly between Margot and myself. And Alana, well.. she's a Bloom. Plenty of riches under her little belt."

William was too stunned to speak. Hannibal didn't flinch, but there was something festering in his maroon eyes.

"You planned to kill your wife and sister for the money?"

"Hey, hey, Dottore, I never said that." He put his hands up, smirking. "He offered that to me. That's it."

"You said you accepted it."

"I accepted something." Another sip. "Does it really matter in the end? He's gone now. Whatever we agreed on is no longer in fruition. I'm guessing Bedelia got all of his money— the main reason I think she did it. Money is the ultimate corrupter, isn't it?"

"Certainly." Hannibal went the nonchalant route, as he typically did. He shrugged off the conversation and turned the tables towards another topic, one that William was only half paying attention to. As the minutes ticked by, each one unbearably long, Mason slowly began to grow less and less animated. He looked grey in the face as he sank into his chair. He set his drink down.

"Are you alright, Mason?" Hannibal asked with false concern. "You look ill."

"One too many, friends," he said, his voice quiet. "Give me a moment, please."

He shut his eyes for a second, then attempted to stand. He didn't make it far; mere seconds after he was on his feet, he collapsed to the ground, groaning.

"I..I'm not sure what's wrong." He clutched his stomach. "Help, Dottore."

Hannibal crouched on the floor next to him, feigning concern. "Mason? Do you feel faint?"

"Very."

"We will help you." He placed a hand on Mason's forehead. "You're not warm. Perhaps your liver could not handle this much alcohol. Is this your usual consumption?"

"I'm a rather heavy..heavy drinker.." Mason's eyes fluttered open and shut, open and shut, until finally they closed and his body went limp.

Hannibal moved quickly and with purpose. He scooped Mason off of the ground, reminding William of the way he'd been carried the night Hannibal drugged him. He set off for the stairs, carrying Mason like he weighed nothing.

William opened the barn doors for him. At the sound of the hinges, the hogs below them went wild. They could sense that something big was coming.

He didn't have to create a hole in the railing— much of the wood was already rotting. He gave one sagging area a few rough kicks, and it created a realistic break in the fence. It would look like Mason had tumbled over in a drunken state.

He stood by Hannibal, placing his hands under Mason as well. They shared a nod.

They pushed Mason over the railing.

His body fell limply like a doll's, and he landed in the pen with a sickening crack. They ran to a more sturdy part of the walkway and peered over at the action.

The hogs struck instantly. It was the most visceral sight William had ever seen, and this was only from a distance. He thought he could be violent— that was nothing compared to the pigs. They cried out in triumph as they dug into Mason's flesh, ripping it from the bone and spilling blood onto the hay. Their teeth sank into skin. They tore Mason's hair out in chunks, and then they went for the brain. No part was left unscathed. William saw red and pink and yellow and white and brown and even blue. It was an intriguing sight.

"Perhaps I was too rash in using 'pig' as an insult." Hannibal stuck his hands in his pockets. "There's clearly a use to them."

"The animal kingdom is more brutal than we give it credit for."

"We did it." Hannibal turned to William, and he was smiling. "We did it."

"Not yet, exactly," William reminded him. "Let us cover our tracks."

They went to work making sure any trace of themselves was gone. They straightened the couch cushions and poured the contents of the pitcher into the yard, refilling it with the normal martini ingredients. They took up all three glasses, dumping out the liquid and placing two of them back in the cabinet. The other one was thrown over into the pigpen as well, to make it look like he'd fallen with his glass. If the pigs had the audacity to eat glass, that was their problem.

It looked like there had been no guests in the house at all. They left the barn doors ajar and scurried out the back door.

They then went to the market. Hannibal took off his hat, showing his face to everyone in the crowd, and as they walked around they exchanged friendly conversation with everyone they came across. Abigail was at home that day— William had sighed in relief when he saw she was missing. He didn't want to rope her into this.

Witness after witness saw them in the market at nearly the exact time of day Mason died. No one knew they'd even been at the house— Margot had kept their visit from Alana. They even bought a few scattered goods to really make an impression.

Right as William's watch struck three, Margot and Alana entered the market. Margot and William exchanged a glance, and a few minutes later the women were approaching them.

"Doctor Lecter!" Alana beamed. "What a pleasure. How are you?" She was so much happier when she wasn't in the house, William realized. It was sad.

"Mrs. Verger, so good to see you." Hannibal kissed the back of her hand politely. "I'm very well, thank you. I hope you're the same?"

"Oh, we just got back from visiting my mother. It was such a lovely visit.."

Her words dissolved as Margot turned to William, her eyes determined. "Where is he?" She asked him softly enough that only he could hear.

William avoided her strong gaze. "..Feeding the pigs."

Margot smiled. It was the first true sign of joy he'd seen in this woman.

"Perfect."

She glanced quickly around the market, checking for onlookers, before slipping something from her pocket into William's. William didn't dare check now, not in front of everyone. He would have to wait until they got home.

"William?"

His head snapped up, and he saw Hannibal and Alana looking at him expectantly. Hannibal smiled.

"I was just telling Mrs. Verger about your origins," he said. "She says she has visited Louisiana."

William brightened, and the two were soon engaged in a lovely conversation about William's home state. William felt guilt eating away at him as he stared into her dark eyes, realizing that she would have to wake up tomorrow to a dead husband. Abusive or not, something like that would completely shake her. He hoped that the relief would outweigh that.

"We ought to get back before it gets too late," Hannibal finally said. "With everything going on lately.."

"Of course, of course." Alana's brows drew together. "It's horrifying. Luckily we're just around the corner. Shall we go, Margot?"

"I suppose we must." Margot shook hands with William and the two women stood next to each other. William recognized their body language, the way their upper arms were nearly pressing together. He and Hannibal were doing the exact same thing.

"Be safe, you two," he said. Margot nodded.

"Thank you." Her voice was serious. "Thank you."

And with that, the two women walked away.

"Now we've done it," William said.

Hannibal turned to him, looking just as casual as if they were having a normal conversation. "I want to kiss you very badly right now," he murmured over the chattering crowd. "I really want to."

"Save it for after dinner." William smirked. "I want to cook with you again— since I've gone to the trouble of providing the meat."

"In that case, I've decided I'm starving. Right now. Let's leave at once."

William laughed and ran to catch up with him as he speed-walked away from the market.

It hit him that a human heart was on the menu, and then it hit him that he didn't care.

Chapter End Notes

I’m planning on having this done in 20 chapters. That means there’s four more after this :)

Prigione

"Roasted beef heart with spinach and mushrooms. A classic of mine."

Hannibal set a meticulously dressed plate in front of William, sending an earthy aroma up to his nose.

"You've provided a beautiful meal, William," he said, taking his seat across from him. "I appreciate it."

"I figured it was about time I did something for you. Considering all you've done for me."

"Do you really think that you have done nothing for me?"

William kept his gaze fixed on Hannibal. Each of them studied the other, waiting to see who would make the first move. After a long pause, they picked up their utensils in unison and began to cut into the meat.

"I was emaciated, and you took me in and fed me. I was cold, and you held me. I was lonely, and you loved me." He paused, staring down at the meat on the prongs of his fork. There would be no going back once he took this bite, he realized. He and Hannibal would merge to become one and the same. "And what have I done?"

Hannibal set his fork down and reached across the table to take his hands. He ran a rough thumb over the back of William's hand. Neither of them had taken a single bite yet.

" '*All days are nights to see till I see thee*,' " he said, " *'and nights bright days when dreams do show me thee*.' "

"You see me as a lovely dream?" William smiled. " '*Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it*.' "

"You are my serpent." Hannibal kissed the back of his hand. He left his lips mere millimeters away from the skin as he spoke again. "You are all I've ever wanted, William."

"Because I see you."

"Yes." Another kiss. "Which is a rare talent to have. A rare gift for me to let it happen."

"Thank you." William pulled Hannibal's hands towards himself and returned the gesture. "Thank you for this gift."

"Thank you for completing me." He took a deep breath. "I want you to eat now, before it's too cold."

And William did.

For a moment, the taste shocked him— the meat was delicious, enveloped in rich flavor and the perfect texture. William savored it, his own heart fluttering with the knowledge that this was his kill, his doing. It melted in his mouth. Every taste bud tingled with excitement.

"I taste fear." Hannibal sipped his wine, a knowing look on his face. "This cow knew it was going to slaughter. Adds an interesting flavor."

"Describe it to me."

"A sort of acidic aftertaste, yet not in a bad way."

"The animal's last little form of payback. And yet we still find a way to enjoy it."

Hannibal's eyes gleamed with pride. He picked up his fork and took another bite.

"It's delicious." William tried to pinpoint that flavor Hannibal had spoken of, but his palate simply wasn't refined enough. He could only taste his own satisfaction.

"Do you feel better? Having food in your stomach every day?"

"Oh, yes." William didn't hesitate. He didn't care about seeming vulnerable in that moment. He'd learned that it was okay. "Yes. It..I didn't know how comfortable it could be."

"I couldn't stand to see you like that, mylimasis. I thought of you in your bed, your stomach growling so viciously..the thought made me want to scream. It reminded me so much of myself..when I was a child." He looked away, embarrassed. "It was not pity. I promise. It was understanding. It was empathy."

"Seeing things from my perspective."

"Empathy is not a trait I thought I had." He licked his lips. "It intrigued me, the way that you could do this to me."

"I didn't know I could feel secure."

"Do you experience empathy, William?"

"I did." He took another bite, pausing to enjoy it. "Before I began. Killing made it disappear. I had to teach myself to be distant. Empathy would only hurt me."

"You put the art of the kill over your empathy."

"Empathy never made me feel good."

Hannibal set his fork down with finality. He stood from his chair, and the legs scraped across the wooden floor with a horrid screech. William flinched, confused.

But there was no ill intention here. Hannibal straddled him, sitting down on his lap with his legs spread wide. He caressed the back of William's head, his thumb running over his ear.

"I cannot control myself." He leaned in to kiss William. He tasted of basil and wine. "You are dangerous, caro. Dangerous."

"Do not give me that. You put yourself in more danger every time you kill."

"Killing is easy. It comes naturally. Loving? Trusting? That is different." He kissed William on the neck, stroking his chest.

"*Caro*..."

"You already feel so much better." Hannibal snuck his hands underneath William's shirt, his finger tracing the line of hair down his navel. "So much more full. Healthy."

"I feel like a different person," he confessed. "It's so much easier to sleep on a full stomach. I didn't even know that until now."

"Oh, that makes me so happy." Hannibal leaned forward and pressed their foreheads together. He kissed William for a long time, his tongue darting between William's lips. William reciprocated, and they quickly became lost in each other. He felt Hannibal's hand rest on his neck, his torso shifting closer to William's.

"You couldn't take care of Mischa," William said, his lips still soaked in Hannibal's saliva, "so you take care of me."

Hannibal smiled, a mixture of sheepishness and pride. "I already failed one person I love," he replied, staring deeply into William's eyes. "I cannot fail you, William." His eyes were copper, glittering pennies.

"You have not failed me. I promise you."

"What did I do to deserve you?"

"I should ask you the same."

"William.." He paused. "I would like to have sex with you."

William tensed. He felt a tingle run through his body, like he was already preparing for it. It excited him. "Like before?"

"More than what we've done before."

A small gasp escaped his lips. "But...but our relationship...*sodomy*...is not allowed," he said. "It's illegal."

Hannibal suddenly began to laugh, startling William. A large smile cracked his entire stoic demeanor, and the corners of his eyes crinkled.

William felt a flash of offense, but then it hit him how ridiculous the words that had just come out of his mouth were. How ironic.

"Wait. Shit. Wait.." He laughed too, a pleasant sensation traveling through his torso. The crows were inside, but they were simply airing out their feathers. Calmly flying about, rather than festering and screeching for what they wanted. His heart fluttered.

Hannibal was so cute when he laughed. It was one of the only times he'd seen the man's teeth— they were small and slightly crooked. He was laughing so hard that he wasn't making noise anymore, and the way his nose crumpled up and his face turned pink made William nearly blister his cheeks open smiling.

"We all have our moments," William said.

"God, I love you so much." He tried to kiss William, but he was sloppy and hit more towards the chin. William didn't mind.

"I would hate to break your moral compass, *mylimasis*," he teased. "Now, would you like to continue eating human meat?"

William cackled. It set Hannibal off again. They leaned against each other and laughed into each other's clothes.

"Don't mock me," William giggled. "I don't prefer to be mocked."

"I figured. After what happened to Chilton."

William stopped, confused. He felt something take root in his gut, the crows fluttering their feathers with suspicion.

"I'm sorry?"

"Chilton mocked you, disrespected you, and now he's dead." Hannibal kissed his cheek. "You do not have to hide it, caro."

"But..no. No, Hannibal." William's smile dropped. "I did not kill Chilton."

Hannibal raised an eyebrow. "You didn't?"

"I thought you did." His voice was soft, fearful.

"No. I promise you, I didn't. I thought you did."

They stared at each other, the reality settling in. Neither of them had killed Chilton. Both of them thought the other had.

So who killed him?

Before Hannibal could respond, there was a banging on the door. The two of them startled, and Hannibal scrambled off of his lap. He brushed the wrinkles out of his pants and glanced at William with a worried expression.

"We're innocent," William reassured him. "Whatever he says, we're innocent."

"Right. Right."

Another aggressive pound, shaking the doorframe. Hannibal flinched.

"Doesn't sound like we're innocent."

William stood from his chair. He pushed past Hannibal and went to open the door for him.

He'd barely turned the knob when the door swung open, and a group of four or five men busted into the house. William stumbled backwards, his waist slamming against the table and sending a shooting pain up his back. He grunted in pain, but Hannibal's cries quickly distracted him.

"Wait. Wait, Jack. Stop this right now!"

Jack Crawford was at the forefront, pinning Hannibal against the kitchen counter and forcing his wrists together. His men, the Italian police in uniform, kept him pinned there as he struggled.

"Detective!" William sprung up to stop them, but the sight of a revolver's barrel made him halt in his tracks. He put his hands up.

"Doctor Hannibal Lecter, you're under arrest for the murder of Frederick Chilton," Jack said, barring Hannibal's wrists together.

"I didn't do this! Jack!" Hannibal shouted. "I promise you, I did not do this! Where did you get this idea from?"

"Detective," William repeated. "I've been with Doctor Lecter for weeks. He never had the chance to kill Chilton. Please," he swallowed, "please tell me where this information came from. I can prove it all wrong."

"We have witness testimony that you were seen leaving Chilton's house the day he died," Jack said to Hannibal, his eyes angry. "You and Chilton were in close competition. People call you *L'Angelo Della Morte*."

"I perform my job to the best of my abilities. Frederick was my friend. I would not kill him." William caught his eyes dancing around the room, as if he was coming up with a strategy to take all of the officers out. William figured that if anyone could easily kill five men in seconds, it was Hannibal— but there were so many of them, and his wrists were bound, and many of them had guns. It was worthless, and both he and Hannibal realized that at the same moment. Even the two of them wouldn't be enough.

"That witness testimony was a fraud. Please, Detective. He can't..he can't go to jail."

"He can tell his story in the interview room," one of the other men said in rough, gravelly Italian. "For right now, we can't have him roaming the streets."

"Please. Let me explain." The color drained from Hannibal's face. William had only seen him look this scared once before.

Mažasis! Atsiprašau!

"Jack. Jack, no!" William stepped closer, and another man drew his gun. He whimpered. "He can't handle tight spaces. You'll ruin him!"

"He should have thought of that before." Jack glared at him. "You stay out of this, Mister Graham. I'm going to interview you tomorrow. The only reason I haven't arrested you is because you haven't been killing your patients for years."

"That is completely baseless," Hannibal objected. "Where on Earth—"

"If I find that you've skipped town, I'll have the entirety of Florence searching for your tail and you'll be in prison for life. Do you understand?"

William nodded, trembling. "Please.."

"William." Hannibal shook his head. The sight was devastating. "Please..just get some rest. We will take care of this. We can clear everything up once we've all gotten some sleep."

"You're not going to be able to sleep." He thought of Hannibal panicking in a small holding cell, cold and uncomfortable.

"Tomorrow," he said again, standing up taller. "I know I am innocent."

A couple of the police officers chuckled to themselves. One of the crows inside of William screeched, beady eyes narrowing with contempt.

"I'll be there tomorrow," he promised. "As soon as I can. I'll talk to everyone we know. They can prove that this is false."

"Yes. You know who to talk to." Hannibal sighed. "Thank you."

"Hannibal.." William took another step. He wanted to hug Hannibal, kiss him, envelop himself in his warmth. Damn these men, trying to take away the only person he loved.

One of the officers held up his hand. "Do not cause more trouble than it is worth."

"Yes. I don't want you in trouble as well, William." Hannibal's shoulders fell. "Goodnight. Do not worry about me."

They shuffled out of the room, pushing Hannibal along. When Hannibal spared one last glance back, William was struck with the anxiety in his eyes.

The door closed. The house was quiet.

William stood in the middle of the dining room, where the remnants of their dinner lay on the table. William's chair still had a divot in the cushion, fresh from where they'd sat laughing just minutes ago.

He picked up the chair and threw it across the room. It smashed onto the floor, and one of the legs splintered. He picked up the large serving plate and tossed the rest of their dinner on the ground, whistling loudly for the dogs. They went crazy, both of them eagerly digging in.

He threw the plates against the wall. He took a large swig of wine, finishing every last drop of his glass, and he threw that as well. He finished Hannibal's wine. That went against the wall. Glass was now scattered all over the floor, and the dogs were cowering near the food. They didn't like the noise.

William ran, glass crunching under his boots, towards the bedroom. He felt every particle in the room buzzing, carrying the remnants of every conversation they'd had in here. Carrying Hannibal's smile, his warm eyes, his tears and his screams and the way he felt when he leaned against William like he was the only steady ground.

He slammed the door and screamed. Each particle shattered like a fragile glass marble, memories leaking and soiling, replaced with fury. He felt fire churning inside of him. Black wings beating against his organs and making his heart shudder. He carried the screams of a thousand crows.

I do not crack. I do not cry.

Something was cracking, but he would never cry.

The dogs scratched faintly at the door, whining to get in. They knew something was amiss. William hesitated before letting them in.

He sat down on the ground, legs crossed, and watched as the dogs sat on either side of him. He gently lifted their paws to check for any glass— nothing that he could see. They did not resent him for scaring them; their job was to protect. To love.

William hugged one of them, and soon the other was scurrying over to be apart of things as well. He wrapped his arms around them both and breathed.

"I don't need to go out," he said to himself. "I don't need to kill. Not tonight. Not after all of this." He tried to take deep breaths. "I just need to calm down. Think of home."

Home was an indeterminate image. It was a blob of colors. He wasn't sure what it was, but he knew it was warm. He knew he was loved there.

"Think. Think, William." He pushed down the lump in his throat. "Home. Home."

Hannibal can't go home. Home has been ruined for him.

He couldn't take this. He couldn't do this anymore.

He stood, taking off his boots and turning the gas lamp off. The room was suddenly pitch black, and once he collapsed into bed he felt the dogs jump up after him. He didn't mind, unlike Hannibal. Hannibal didn't have to know.

Would he ever be home to know?

William curled up into a ball and hugged himself. He knew he had to clean up the mess he'd just made, but he didn't have the mental capacity. For now, he could pretend it was warm enough to sleep.

Cara

Transcribed interview with prisoner Hannibal Lecter-- shortly after seven o'clock in the morning, the 27th of April

John ("Jack") Crawford: Doctor Lecter, we've called you here so you can get your act together. We'd very much like to hear your side of the story. You were adamant last night that you are completely innocent.

Lecter does not speak.

JC: If you stay silent, you're only going to be in here longer. Unless your coworker, Mister Graham, can come up with a damn good alibi for you, then to me, it looks like you're guilty.

Lecter does not speak.

JC: If you're going to waste my time, then I'm going to put you back in the cell. This is only making you look worse, Doctor.

Lecter does not speak. Crawford sighs. End transcript.

William slept restlessly, stuck in a cycle of horrific nightmares and periods of laying wide awake in the dark. It wasn't the prospect of being alone that bothered him so much; he was good at being alone, considering how he'd done it all of his life. No, it was the thought of Hannibal laying on the hard floor of a prison cell, feeling the walls closing in on him as his traumatized mind piled snow outside of the door. That beautiful, sad language on his tongue.

He wanted to go straight to the station as soon as the sun rose, but he knew that a move like that wouldn't be productive. Jack wasn't inclined to believe him. He needed something concrete, and he needed to go to the woman whom he hated the most in that moment. The thought of facing Margot made his blood boil. It was her impatience, her baseless "testimony" that caused all of this. She couldn't wait a few more days?

He had to face her, though. He had to get her to recount her statement. She had promised that day to be their alibi-- William hoped to God that she would follow through.

Before he left the house, he changed out of his sweat-soaked clothes and surveyed the mess he'd left in the dining room. He shook his head and retrieved a broom from the closet.

After sweeping all of the broken glass into the bin, mopping up the floor of last night's ruined, sticky dinner, and making sure there were no marks on the walls, William felt strangely calm. He understood where Hannibal's love for perfection came from; there was something so satisfying about a spotless home. Perhaps if he cleaned up enough physical messes, it would be enough for his ruined mind, too.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror. Over the course of just one sleepless night, the massive purple circles under his eyes were back. Gone was the man with a bright face, borrowing suits and cuddling under blankets and kissing cheeks. It was a shocking reminder of the past.

The walk to the Verger home was quiet. It was early enough in the morning that no one wanted to brave the outside just yet, content to watch the sunrise from their homes and emerge when the time was right for them. William did not have that choice. He needed to get Hannibal back before he could ever enjoy anything again.

He knew that it was silly to have such a breakdown over his love being gone for a day. He knew that, most likely, Hannibal would be out of there by the end of today. It wasn't the man himself he was mourning, though-- it was their peaceful life here. It was the delusion that they were hidden here, the thought that they could stay right in the place they called home without any troubles. Now, everything was uprooted. Hannibal would be scarred by this experience. They would have to go somewhere else.

He hadn't broken down over the eternal loss of the man he loved. He knew he would get that back. He had broken down because none of this was fair. They had chosen to become sinful killers, and that was their fault, but everything else was so terribly unfair. William's twisted anxieties, Hannibal's trauma, Jack's refusal to listen to anyone but himself, Chilton's ugly glares, Mason laughing as he discussed killing his wife and sister. The way that the world saw two men in love as something to be feared and taunted.

As he raised his fist to knock on the Verger's front door, he found himself hesitating to wake the family up. He quickly shook that thought away-- they didn't deserve his respect-- and pounded on the door with all of his might. He waited for a minute or two, and finally the knob turned.

The last person he expected to see was Alana. She stood in the doorway, her face pale and her eyes tired, and when she saw William she visibly deflated. She was dressed for the day, so she had been up a while, but she didn't look like it.

"I am sorry to bother you, Mrs. Verger," William said. He didn't have the energy to even offer a polite smile. "I was looking for Margot. Hannibal and I have a situation that requires--
"

"Mister Graham." Alana stepped aside. "Will you come in? Please?"

She looked so desperate that it took William by surprise. Frowning, he followed her into the house, remembering the living room from their last visit. Of course, he couldn't show any recognition.

"Please, come sit." She nearly collapsed onto the couch, appearing to be light-headed. Her breath was shaky as if she were about to cry.

"Mrs. Verger?" William sat next to her. "Are you feeling alright?"

"She is not here," Alana said. "Margot is not here. I hope this isn't urgent."

It is. But what could he say? How could he explain himself?

"I am truly sorry for your loss," he told her, bowing his head. "It is such a tragedy."

"God is with me." She attempted to smile, but it quickly fell off her face. "Our town is bathing in tragedy recently, isn't it? Il Mostro. Frederick. My husband."

"Excuse me, Madame?" A man in uniform stuck his head into the room. "May I get you and your guest anything?"

Alana jumped up, flustered. She was ghostly pale. "Oh, of course! I'm so sorry, Mister Graham. Oh, my manners...I'll get us some tea."

William held up his hands. "Oh, no, you do not have to. I cannot stay for long."

"Nonsense." She turned to the man. "Get Mister Graham and I some tea, Signore. Please."

The servant turned and left the room. Alana blinked back tears.

"I am so sorry," she said again. She placed a hand on her chest. "I am all over the place. I'm so lost without.."

William felt a pang of guilt in his chest. Mason deserved to die, but his family didn't deserve to be left behind. Alana sank back down onto the couch and hesitantly held out her arms.

"..May I?" She asked, blushing. William couldn't outright refuse; he let her embrace him.

"Did she pay you?" She whispered in his ear.

William's heart stopped. He didn't know how to respond.

"I'm sorry?"

"Did Margot pay you?"

William remembered the bag of money that Margot had slipped in his pocket. Once he had taken it out of his pocket the day before and opened it, he and Hannibal had counted a sum

that was almost shocking.

"..Yes, Madame, she did."

"Good." Alana pulled back just before the servant reentered the room. He set two cups of hot tea on the coffee table.

"Grazi," the two muttered. Alana waited until he was out of the room to speak again.

"I am very sorry she threatened you," she said. "I would not have done things the way she did."

"She told us you didn't know."

Alana smirked despite her sickly appearance. "I love Margot with all of my heart, but she is the worst liar I have ever met. Poor dear. Looks like we both had the same idea."

William decided not to drink the tea. He knew the risk all too well. "I'm not sure I understand, Mrs. Verger."

"My husband never loved me. All of this time, he never even found out that I speak English." Her voice cracked. "He invited Frederick over for dinner a few weeks ago. They began to talk openly about their plans..and they wanted to kill me and Margot." She fiddled with her necklace. "Take our shares of the Verger fortune all for themselves.

William feigned surprise. So Mason hadn't been bluffing. "I am so sorry."

"I told Margot as soon as she got home. *Mia cara* is a feisty thing. I could see the murder in her eyes. I knew she had her sights set on killing Mason before he could kill us, and she could not lie her way out of it. I suppose it was some futile effort at protecting me from the whole situation." She shrugged. "And the worst part is that I didn't try to stop her. She could have been badly hurt, and I didn't speak up." Her lip quivered.

"Something tells me that Margot will not be stopped once she makes up her mind," he reassured her. "There was likely nothing you could have done."

"My husband was an evil, lying cheater. Chilton was somehow even worse." She shuddered. "It's why..it's why I don't feel bad for doing what I did."

William stiffened. She had his full attention now. "What you did?"

"Oh, I am a monster." Tears began to run down her face. "I do not care about his feelings, about his sanctity of life; I care about what God thinks of me. I hope every day that God can forgive me for what I've done to Frederick." She shook her head. "I didn't mean to, Mister Graham, I swear!"

"I believe you, Madame." William shifted closer. "But you must tell me what happened."

"Frederick invited me over to discuss family matters. He knew some of my family members, and he said he wanted to talk. I knew about the plan by then, and so did Margot--

that's why I didn't tell her where I was going. That was so foolish of me, I know now." She let out a soft cry. "I brought Margot's gun, just in case. It was in my bag, but I never ended up needing it.

"He gave me a drink. When he walked out of the room for a moment, there was something itching in the back of my mind, some impulse that I couldn't ignore. I felt like my drink was not safe, so I swapped our glasses. I figured that the worst thing that could happen is that he gets my drink and I get his, and he never notices. But..I don't know what was in it, but he was frothing at the mouth in minutes."

"Oh, my goodness."

"I know." Alana's eyes were haunted. "It wasn't long before he was unconscious. I...I did not want to simply leave him there, so I dragged him into the bedroom." She shut her eyes. "I put him under the covers and left. I ran."

"You did not mean to kill him, Madame. It was a complete accident." William placed a hand on her shoulder. "Frederick was the evil one. Frederick was the murderer. You are, in fact, very brave for what you did."

"It was some random thought. Something I couldn't explain.."

William understood the notion. He understood the situation that Alana had found herself in: she has grown to love someone she wasn't supposed to love, and the rest of the world had turned against her. In some inexplicable impulse, she made a move that saved herself while ending someone else.

William saw himself in that. Almost scarily so.

"It's odd. I thought I loved him. Perhaps I did, at some point in time." She laughed without humor. "But then he struck me. I cannot remember why. It was a horrific moment for me.

"That night, I could not stand to sleep near him. When he snored, I went into Margot's room. As I stood over her..saw her come awake.." Alana got a wistful look in her eyes. "Her soft lips and her sweet brown eyes, still clouded with sleep, they created this new feeling in me. I shed tears, and she welcomed me into her bed, her arms.."

William knew where the story was going to go, and he felt the need to stop her. "Mrs. Verger," he said, placing a hand on her forearm. "This is your story to tell. It does not have to be mine to hear."

"Margot told me that you and Hannibal.."

"We know each other intimately. We are lovers." William realized how nice it was to let the words out. "So I understand."

"I love Margot. She makes me feel appreciated. I believe that is what love is. Not what Mason gave me."

"She makes you feel like you are the only other person in the world."

"Yes."

"You two deserve to be happy." He leaned forward. "I truly mean that— you two are brave, and you are strong, and you deserve each other. Your love is beautiful, just as much so as it would be between a man and a woman. God brought you together for a reason." He lowered his voice to nearly a whisper. "But..the man I love is in prison for a crime he did not commit."

Alana smiled softly. "Oh, I know," she said. "Where do you think Margot is?"

"She—"

"She will explain everything. After all, you two paid us a visit on the night of Frederick's death. Mason was not at home. He killed Frederick to have the money to himself." She shrugged. "Bedelia was not home. For all she knows, Mason was over there. From a distance, it's easy for a witness to mistake Mason for Hannibal, and the second person could have simply been a pedestrian. She regrets sending that tip in, but she's going to try to fix it."

William's shoulders fell in relief. "You two have it all figured out."

"My husband wanted me dead. He planned with Chilton to murder me, and then he stabbed Chilton in the back." Her eyes hardened. "It is exactly the story Detective Crawford is searching for. Can you uphold it? For all of us?"

"I swear. We will keep all of your secrets."

"We will keep yours. Margot is more bark than bite, I promise you. She was very afraid. I am sorry she did this to you."

"I admire her confidence. She has been horrifically abused, and so have you. I am only glad she's following through on being our alibi."

"She will not show it, but she is grateful."

"As am I." William stood. "I suppose I need to get over there. He wanted to interview me anyway— hopefully with both of us there, the story will take form."

"Shall I see you out?"

"No need. I know my way around." The two shared a knowing stare, nodding to each other. "Thank you, Mrs. Verger."

"Please, you don't have to call me that." She smiled. "That is not my name anymore."

William ran to get the man he loved.

Tinginys

Chapter Notes

I have never experienced a nonverbal episode, nor have I met somebody who has. However, I have done research to the best of my ability on how it feels to be nonverbal, and I've tried to apply my knowledge best i can here. If I have done something wrong, please don't hesitate to let me know so I can portray this correctly.

Transcribed interview with Margot Verger- noon on the 27th of April

John ("Jack") Crawford: I need you to repeat what you told me the moment you came in.

Margot Verger: My brother..[**sobbing**] I'm sorry. I'm sorry. He..He murdered Frederick Chilton. Poisoned him. [**She cries for a moment before regaining composure.]**

JC: You're sure of this? Where was he the night Chilton died?

MV: Alana and I were at home when Doctor Lecter and his colleague came over. The one whose name was in the paper.

JC: William Graham.

MV: Yes. They both came over, and they had a gift for Mason. They wanted to thank him for providing some food for Doctor Lecter's party, but he was not home. We let them in to take the gift and we were chatting for a little while.

JC: I'm asking where Mason was.

MV: I did not know where Mason had gone— he'd slipped out that afternoon without explanation.

JC: When did he return?

MV: Early in the evening, after the doctor and Mister Graham left. He ignored his gift. He seemed very agitated.

JC: And you believe he killed Chilton based on this?

MV: When I heard about Chilton's death, I realized what was happening. He would not stop talking about Chilton, how he was a liar and a cheat. He was very angry. When I asked him what he'd done..he threatened me and Alana. He said.. oh, my goodness. He said that he would kill both of us if we revealed the truth.

JC: And Alana can verify this? William can verify that he was at your home that afternoon?

MV: Yes. Please, you must believe me. You have the wrong man. Doctor Lecter has done nothing wrong.

Transcribed interview with William Graham— 12:30 on the 27th of April

John ("Jack") Crawford: Tell me where you were the night Chilton died.

William Graham: We paid a visit to the Vergers. We wanted to see Mason, but he was not at home, so we spoke with the women for a bit before returning home. We were there until you came to alert us about his death.

JC: Tell me about the relationship between Mason and Chilton.

WG: I'm afraid I cannot tell you much. I don't know my way around Florence as well as you all. I never really saw them interact. Hannibal told me once that they don't get along very well.

JC: Do you believe Mason could have done something to Frederick?

WG: I would say that anything is plausible. Mason always struck me as a tad unstable, if that helps.

JC: What do you think of Doctor Lecter's nickname?

WG: I'm not too sure where it came from. I've worked with him for weeks now, and I have never seen him act a single step out of line. What you must understand is that patients often come to us in critical condition, or they're much too late to actually be helped. Patients are going to die in a hospital. It is the sad reality of life. But Hannibal cherishes every one of his patients. He cherished Frederick. No, Hannibal wouldn't hurt a fly if it was buzzing right in his ear.

Due to an overall lack of evidence and the confirmation of an alibi, prisoner Hannibal Lecter has been released. Further investigation will continue into the murder of Frederick Chilton.

William wasn't allowed to be present when Hannibal was released. There was some paperwork to be done, he was told, and Hannibal would be returning later that evening. William tried to negotiate, but he had no other choice in the end than to go home and wait.

He considered fixing dinner, but he knew he would find some way to butcher the meal and probably set the kitchen on fire. Besides, perhaps Hannibal would be in the mood to cook. It could be a stress reliever. He sat with the dogs, feeding them some meat, and once the sun began to set and the temperature dropped he started a fire.

It got later and later, and William began to worry. It was way past the time Jack had told him, and he couldn't help but wonder if Hannibal had wandered off, abandoned him. He'd been struggling anyway with the guilt of letting Hannibal be carted off— it would make sense that Hannibal was angry enough to leave him behind. Or perhaps something had happened to him. He'd been harassed on the street, kidnapped, worse.

He wanted to go out searching, but he wanted to be home when Hannibal got there. He eventually decided to stay; they could have delayed his release until morning. Jack seemed like the type.

He made the bed down and prepared for another sleepless night. He changed into nightclothes, slipping under the covers and waiting, waiting, waiting.

At some point, as he was drifting in and out of sleep, he heard the kitchen door open and shut. Footsteps coming towards the bedroom.

Hannibal stepped in.

"*Caro*!" William leapt out of bed and hugged Hannibal with all of his strength. Hannibal returned the gesture, clutching William's hair and sighing in relief. "Are you okay? What kept you?"

No response. Hannibal let go, went for the dresser and changed quickly, recklessly. William watched him, afraid of saying something wrong. He'd been right: Hannibal was furious.

But then Hannibal fell into bed and held out his arms. William climbed in after him, snuggling into his embrace. Hannibal wrapped his arms around William, then buried his face in William's chest and began to cry.

"Oh, darling." William kissed his head. "Darling. I'm so glad you're back. I missed you. I missed you."

He didn't say anything. William reached for the blanket and pulled it over Hannibal's trembling shoulders.

"I know the cell must have been torture. I am so sorry. You did not deserve that."

Another silence. Just tears.

"I am right here, caro." William closed his eyes. "I am never leaving. No matter what happens." He pet Hannibal's hair. "We will get out of here. We'll go to the countryside, like you talked about."

He may as well have been talking to one of the dogs. Hannibal clearly wasn't in the mood. He continued to rub Hannibal's back and kiss his forehead. For once, Hannibal was the one drenched in sweat, giving shallow gasps.

"Just get some rest. Please, just get some rest. You're not there anymore, you're home with me. I love you."

Hannibal didn't return the sentiment. William went to sleep with a hole in his chest.

When he woke up, the spot next to him on the bed was empty, the divot of Hannibal's body still imprinted in the mattress. He placed his hand on the spot; it was still warm. As he climbed out of bed, he heard soft noises coming from the kitchen.

He followed the noise. Behind the kitchen counter, Hannibal was hunched over some assembly of ingredients. He raised his head and smiled softly before returning to work.

"Are you cooking?" WIlliam asked, bewildered. From somewhere in the house, a clock chimed twice.

As was typical now, Hannibal didn't answer. He was taking some type of biscuit and crumbling them into dust with the pestle. He had a stick of butter next to him, as well as a can of what appeared to be condensed milk and a bar of chocolate. William watched him for a moment before the silence became uncomfortable. He shifted his feet.

"I'm sorry," he said for what felt like the thousandth time. "I know that you are angry with me, and I am so sorry. I know it should have been me.."

He trailed off when he saw Hannibal's reaction. He had stopped his work completely, his hands resting on the counter, and hurt flooded his features. He shook his head adamantly. He reached across and took hold of William's hand, giving his knuckles the most tender kiss that William had ever received.

"You're not angry?"

Another shake of the head, this time mouthing "no". He kissed William again.

"That cell must have been so hard. I'm so sorry." He couldn't bear to imagine it all. Just thinking of him there for one day was enough. "I do not wish for you to be haunted anymore."

Hannibal reached down and handed him a new biscuit, one that wasn't crumbled. William took it as an affirmation that words couldn't express. When he bit down, the taste of cinnamon flooded his tongue.

"I'm surprised that this is therapeutic for you," he quipped. "I would have already messed this up."

Hannibal let out a small scoff, the first sound William had heard from him since the crying fit. William smiled.

"I don't see you making dessert much. I could go for sweets." He leaned on his elbows on the counter.

Hannibal shook his head and pointed to the icebox. He then held up five fingers and made a circle motion with his other hand.

"Five hours?" He made an exaggerated frown as Hannibal nodded. "Fine. Breakfast, then. I am not past having dessert for breakfast."

He grew content to watch Hannibal work in silence. He melted the butter and chocolate over the stove, let it cool, and then mixed in the milk. He added the cookies and stirred the mixture together, forming a thick batter. He poured it into a loaf pan and set it in the icebox,

wiping his hands with finality. There was a small tinge of pride in his face that made William happy.

Once he had cleaned up, he looked around the kitchen as if he were lost. He didn't know what to do with himself now.

"Do you want to go back to bed now?" William asked. They both had large bags under their eyes, and he could tell that Hannibal was feeling weak. Hannibal reluctantly nodded and took his hand, and William led them back to bed. He cradled Hannibal to his chest.

"I love you," William said, kissing him on the forehead. Hannibal's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth to speak; when he tried, however, nothing would come out. It was only a series of strangled sounds, like something had grabbed hold of his throat and constricted his vocal chords. The more that he tried, the more distressed he seemed.

"Hey, hey, hey." William brought a hand up to Hannibal's cheek. "It's okay. I don't always have to hear it back."

Hannibal's shoulders fell in relief. William pulled him close, and soon they were both asleep.

By the time both of them were fully awake, it was nearly noon. Hannibal, shielding his eyes from the sun streaming in the windows, got out of bed without a single word. William followed him, catching up and taking his hand.

"Dessert for lunch, then."

Hannibal laughed softly. It sent warmth through William's chest.

He took the treat from the icebox and set it down on the counter. It had solidified in the pan into a makeshift cake, and he cut it into slices that he plated and served. He gave William a fork, plated his own, and dug in with a fervor that William had never seen from him before.

The cake looked marbled, light and dark brown. It was thick and dense, with a nice mixture of crunch from the biscuits and cream from the milk. The chocolate was rich and delicious. The cool temperature was refreshing.

"Wow," he said around a mouthful. "This is amazing. I've never seen this dessert before."

Hannibal paused, his eyebrows scrunching together. His mouth opened and closed for a moment, and he struggled with the syllables on his tongue.

"T-T—" He stopped, took a deep breath. "Tin—*Tinginys*. From home." His voice wavered, and he swallowed. "*Tinginys*."

William decided not to make a big deal about him speaking— he didn't want Hannibal to feel patronized. Inside, though, he was jumping for joy. "That's what it's called?"

"Mhm."

"Delicious."

Hannibal smirked and took another bite.

Afterwards, they headed towards the bedroom, but instead of going straight Hannibal took a sharp turn into a room that William had never seen before. It was a small library, cozy and dim, with floor to ceiling bookshelves and plush chairs. Gas lamps hung from the dark walls. Hannibal pulled back the curtains and let the sun into the room.

He went for one of the top shelves, reaching high up for a worn-out box. It was falling apart at the edges, and Hannibal handled it carefully. He sat down with it on the floor, crossing his legs, and looked up at William expectantly.

Once he'd taken his place, William looked inside of the box. It was a stack of papers, yellowed and worn. Hannibal flipped through some papers written in a language William had never come across before, setting them aside before stopping on a crude child's drawing. He inhaled sharply, bringing a hand up to his mouth.

It was two stick figures, drawn messily with arms barely attached to their thin bodies and a single curl of hair on the little girl. They were smiling. Mischa, the paper read, Hannibal.

Hannibal was blinking back tears, and William put his arm around him.

"She is not suffering anymore," he whispered. "You did everything you could, *caro*."

Hannibal picked the paper up and lightly kissed it before setting it aside with the others. He flipped through a few more— advanced calculus notes, what looked like essays, language practice— before finally settling on what he'd been looking for. It was a note in messy script, written in Italian and dated from many years ago. Hannibal would have still been in school, William deciphered. Hannibal gave it to him to read.

Hannibal is an exemplary student, the man had written, *but it is difficult to teach him when he refuses to speak. You have a brilliant boy on your hands, Robertas— do not let him get himself into trouble. This stubbornness must come to an end. It is, quite frankly, disrespectful.*

I do not mean this to come off as dismissive. I am eager to continue teaching your boy. However I only want what is best for him, and I can only wonder what genius lies beneath his throat, as well.

"This has happened before," William said, lowering the paper. Hannibal nodded, his eyes sad. "I..I know it should have been me. I should have turned myself in, and then you wouldn't have had to be in that cell. You would be able to speak.." William shook his head, his chest fluttering.

"No." Hannibal's voice startled both of them. It was like gravel, rocks on the beach. "H-Happens. It happens. Sometimes."

"It's not just because of the cell?"

"No. Happens." He shrugged. "Like.." He squeezed his eyes shut, then he mimed something grabbing onto his throat. William nodded.

"Take your time, okay, love?"

Hannibal leaned forward to kiss him on the lips. They melted into each other, tender and loving this time. They weren't overcome with fiery passion every time they were near each other now— instead, the other's presence was calming, natural. William focused on Hannibal's soft lips, pressing against fragile nerves and sending a current through his whole body. Hannibal pulled back to lick his lips, and his tongue brushed against William's mouth. William tugged him closer.

"Your love is made of so much more than just your voice," William breathed into Hannibal's mouth, tilting his head to kiss him deeper. He felt the breath streaming out of Hannibal's nose and tickling the skin on his upper lip. He was convinced that their heartbeats synced together. He couldn't help but smile, and once he disrupted the kiss by turning up his lips he noticed that Hannibal's eyes were still closed. He was breathless. William moved up to kiss his eyelid, to which Hannibal closed his hand into a fist around William's shirt. He held onto William for dear life.

"I've got you. I've always got you. Do you understand that, Hannibal?"

Hannibal nodded. He reached for William's chest, tracing a cross over William's heart. Then a heart. Then a smiley face.

"Okay, now you're just playing around." William beamed when Hannibal smiled. They shared one last kiss on the lips before setting their sights on the papers, returning for a moment to when things were better.

Dio- Reprise

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The chapel was massive, beautiful, and mercifully empty.

It was just past midnight, and William and Hannibal were set to leave for the countryside the next morning. They were catching a train and going as far as they could, finding a carriage for the rest of the journey. They were going to be nonstop for a while, and William honestly wanted to be in bed, but Hannibal had insisted on coming to the church in the middle of town. William wasn't sure why, but he was glad they came when no one else was here.

Stained glass portraits of Christ watched over them from the tall ceilings— portraits that William assumed were beautiful in the sun, but now just looked black and ominous. As they knelt in the aisle, right in front of the giant wooden cross, William stared with awe at all of the magnificent stone pillars. The night was chilly, and it had seeped into the building's walls and made the room feel like ice.

"Are you wanting to pray?" William asked. Hannibal responded by bowing his head, closing his eyes and letting his eyebrows come together with something resembling worry.

William watched him. His mouth moved, but no sounds came out of him. He hadn't spoken since their kiss in the library, which was nearly four days ago now. William had gotten used to this new Hannibal, accommodating rather quickly. He knew now how to speak for both of them, and it worked out fine.

When Hannibal finished, he opened his eyes and frowned. He shook his head and stared at the floor.

They knew each other well enough now that William understood the problem. Hannibal had renounced God long ago, but there had still been some pure portion of his heart that deeply wanted God's help. He wanted his sister back. He didn't want to be haunted. God couldn't give him any of that, though, and that's why there was so much resentment.

"I never went to church," William said. "I only learned the Lord's Prayer in school— we were Protestant."

Hannibal gestured to him, urging him on. Can't hurt, his eyes seemed to say.

"Our Father," he began, watching Hannibal bow his head and following along, "who art in Heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done..on Earth as it is in Heaven. Give us this day our daily bread—"

A sudden cold hand on his wrist halted him from his words. He opened his eyes and looked up to see Hannibal, who had inched closer to him, gazing upon him with so much

love that William's heart nearly stopped. They stared into each other's eyes, and William saw the years and years of hurt in them. The rare trust.

Being seen by those eyes was its own form of biblical awe. He felt so naked beneath that stare. He was looking into God's eyes.

"..For thine is the kingdom," Hannibal said, his rough voice echoing through the chapel, "and the power," he pressed their foreheads together, "and the glory, forever."

"You're speaking." The words fell out of William before he could stop them.

"All of my life, God has never graced me with His presence," Hannibal replied, "but I believe I just saw him in your eyes. I must pray to you."

They kissed. William felt an unfamiliar sting in the backs of his eyes. His throat was crammed full, and he was unable to swallow.

You left out the lines about forgiveness, he wanted to say. And the deliverance from evil. You stopped me before I could say those.

It's not for lack of reason. Everything you do is with intention.

"Amen," Hannibal whispered.

"Amen." William felt something in him shatter. He pulled back and doubled over, his head resting on the divot between Hannibal's legs.

He began to sob.

He had not cried in years. It was an unnatural feeling, hot tears streaming down his cheeks and lungs gasping for air. It felt cathartic, but there was a hint of shame that came with finally breaking down when Hannibal had been so tough for so long. Hannibal had been through so much worse, and he was fine right now. He was being overdramatic, he told himself

"Ah, there it is. There are those tears. *Caro*." Hannibal pet his head, bending over as well. He murmured into William's ear, kissing him on the temple. "*Mylimasis. Gražusis. Aš tave myliu*."

"I'm so tired."

"It's going to be alright. We are finished now."

"It's not fair." He clenched his hands into fists and brought them down onto Hannibal's thighs. Hannibal let him get his pain out. "It's not fair."

"Nothing is ever fair," Hannibal told him. "But there are times when good fortune comes around." He helped William sit up, then pulled him close and let him rest his head on his shoulder. "Like when I met you."

"You and Mischa didn't deserve what you went through," William cried. "You were *children*! Margot and Alana don't deserve to be abused. They're going to find us, Hannibal, and they will take us away from each other forever, and—"

"Darling, stop." Hannibal held William's head in his hands and looked him firmly in the eyes again. "There is nothing we can do to put a broken teacup back together. Once it shatters, it will never be the same."

"I don't trust a God that would let the teacup fall in the first place."

"That is why I do not believe in Him. I wanted to try one more time, before we ran away and became reborn." Hannibal sighed. "But nothing changed. Nothing has changed."

"He has no mercy. He will not forgive us."

"Or He is not there."

William wasn't sure which option was the better of the two.

"Why are you crying, *Mylimasis*?"

He didn't know. "You fed me. You kept me warm. You held me." He hiccuped. "I thought I would be alone forever. I thought I would starve to death, alone, in my freezing house.."

"Oh, darling."

"I worried they would keep you in that cell forever. I do not want to die alone. I want you."

"You will never be alone again." He kissed William's forehead. "We shall live together. We shall die together. I love you."

"I love you." William let out another sob. "You were a child.."

"Please, William. I am still here. I am alive. I always liked to believe there was a reason for that; perhaps that reason is you."

"No one has ever held me before." His breaths were shaky and unstable. "I was so lost without you. I thought I'd lost you!"

"You will never lose me. Remember what you told me?" He rubbed William's back. "I've got you. I've always got you, caro."

"I am so afraid to die. I know that I will suffer for eternity for what I have done."

"If that is the case," Hannibal said, "and that is what you believe, then there is still time to repent. There is time to beg for your forgiveness. To admit that it was all a mistake, that you renounce your soul for it. I will support you if you do that,"

"It would be a lie," William replied, softer than ever, "because I like it."

"Do you plan to tell Him that?"

"I like it." William turned to the cross looming over them. "I like it!"

Oh, the thought of a beating heart underneath his palms. Sinking his teeth into tissue.

"I love it! I love the way it makes me feel!" He cried to the statue, his face turning red.

"I worship my love!" Hannibal joined in. "I worship William."

"I trust Hannibal more than I will ever trust you." He expected the crows to flutter with worry, but they didn't. This was different— they had all of the confidence he did. They screamed along with him.

"Does this feel good?"

"Cathartic, yes." He smiled. "But I'm definitely going to Hell now."

"The only Hell I know is a world without you. Not even the Devil can take you away from me."

William knew he would never be the same again. Neither of them would. But perhaps that was for the better.

"I love you."

"I love you." Hannibal kissed him on the lips. "We are going to run, *caro*, and we will be born anew. Never again will we suffer in this life."

"What are we waiting for, then?" William wiped away his tears. "I am ready."

One month later

"Please, I insist you dance with me."

William looked up from his book to see Hannibal with an outstretched hand, smirking. He smiled in disbelief.

"Dance? Here?"

Hannibal held out his arms, gesturing to the endless fields of green around them. "With such a marvelous yard, we must make use of it. And you look so beautiful here."

William stood from his spot on the porch step. Summer was quickly approaching, and the sun was making the most of its extended time. The sky was pink and orange, and the sun cast long shadows beneath them as they ran to the middle of the yard. The two dogs chased after them, wagging their tails and waiting to see what they would do.

"We have not done this since the party," William said, letting Hannibal take his hands. "We have not had the chance, I suppose."

Hannibal closed his eyes and inhaled the smell of grass. Bugs chirped around them, providing their song for them to dance to. "We have endless chances now."

William shuffled closer, feeling an arm encircle his waist, and they were off.

They had much more space in the yard than they had in the ballroom; they didn't have to worry about running into other couples or receiving judgmental stares. Here, under the great eyes of Nature, two men could dance and it was okay. They could kiss, and the world would continue to spin. Hannibal twirled him around, stretching his arm out and sending William far away— the feeling was uncomfortable— before pulling him back in. He pressed his forehead to William's and kissed his lips.

"This is when I fell in love with you," he murmured. "Did you know that?"

"I figured, considering the way you looked at me afterwards."

"I couldn't help myself." Another kiss. "You looked marvelous."

William wished he could have captured that moment in time, gazed back at it later to see how far they'd come. That night, he'd worn a borrowed suit that was much too big for him. He was skeletal. Dancing alone had made his malnourished mind dizzy.

Now, he was only dizzy with love. He sank down onto the grass, petting the dogs, and lay on his back. He examined the peach and magenta clouds.

Hannibal soon followed, taking his hand. "Our sky is a work of art, is it not?"

"Sometimes I wonder if our stars were the same. When I was in America. If we stared at the same sky and weren't even aware of it."

"You had to enter my line of fate somehow. Perhaps it was a simple star that connected our strings." Their upper arms were touching, and William felt warm. He could finally lay on his back without feeling his stomach caving in on itself, growling and showing off his ribs. He was so comfortable.

"I do not care for fate," he replied. "It implies that we cannot make our own choices. It implies that suffering is written in the stars and cannot be prevented."

It implies that Mischa was brought into this world for the sole purpose of being taken away from you. It implies that I was supposed to lie in my bed, clutching my stomach and groaning in pain. I cannot bear the thought of that.

"Then what do you suggest brought us together?"

He turned on his side. A gentle breeze rustled Hannibal's sandy hair, and as the man turned his head William was once again drawn into those maroon eyes. "Does it matter?" He asked. "As long as we are here now?"

Hannibal smiled. He raised a hand up to run his fingers through William's hair. William's eyes fluttered closed.

"That feels nice."

"I cannot believe you are mine." Hannibal stroked his cheek with his other hand. "You are everything I've ever wanted."

"I'm not sure why, out of all of your guests, you chose the peasant. But I'm glad you did."

"Hush." He leaned closer. "I made you more *tinginys*."

William brightened. "You did?"

"Yes. I'll fix us some." When he shifted to stand, William grabbed his forearm to hold him back. He got back down onto the ground with an eyebrow raised.

"Let me.." William kissed him.

They lay like that, lips pressing together, bodies entwined, until the sun said its last goodbye and dipped down beneath the mountains.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!